

# Civil Society

## RISING ANGER

NATIONWIDE PROTESTS BEGIN WITH STUDENTS



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IN THE LIGHT

SAMITA RATHOR



LETTERS



Film fest

Thanks for your cover story, 'Films in the clouds', on the Dharamshala film festival organised by Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam. Very few magazines would care to cover such an event up in the hills but your redoubtable writer, Saibal Chatterjee, took the trouble to go there. He understood how important it is for the culture of good cinema to spread and thereby help people acquire a more nuanced view of films.

Dorji Tawang

I really admire Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam for having managed to organise such a wonderful film festival in Dharamshala with so little financial support. It was especially heart-warming to see so many schoolchildren attend and listen to all the discussions.

Swati Asher

Justice report

I read your interview with Shireen Vakil and Valay Singh, 'The criminal justice system is not working,' on the India Justice Report with interest. Its findings should galvanise state governments, NGOs and the media into reforming the criminal justice system. We should use the financial resources we have as best as we can to improve infrastructure and then infuse best practices from around the world into the system.

Shashi Deshpande

Lovely Sandur

Thanks very much for Susheela Nair's article on Sandur, 'An oasis in a valley.' About 50 years ago, a very good

friend of mine, but much senior to me, was a personal tutor of the Prince of Sandur. He was full of praise for the royal family. I did not know, however, that the Ghorpades admitted Harijans into temples in Sandur as early as 1930. The photography, especially of the marigold field, was superb. I just wish you had also published some pictures of the current members of the Ghorpade family.

Devendra Oza

SOS reunion

I read Sidika Sehgal's story on the SOS family's reunion in Delhi. Many thanks to her for the write-up. SOS is doing great and amazing work and

deserves all the praise this humane organisation can get. I would like to wish them the very best for all their future endeavours.

A. Michael

It was good to know that children who grew up in the SOS villages have become successful and responsible people. This is what institutional care of children should look like.

Frederick Gomes

Jobs and skills

I read your story, 'Hiring the disabled: Youth4Jobs' winning model.' Meera Shenoy's work is indeed commendable. Such work needs to be supported and promoted. Dignity is important for people with disability. Skilling rural people is most important as disabled children and youth are mostly maltreated in their families since they are seen as a liability.

There is a similar effort underway in Bengaluru. Vindhya e-Info media Pvt. Ltd. is a BPO started in 2006 with the objective of bringing business and philanthropy together. Vindhya has been able to create employment opportunities for more than 1,800 people by creating a platform for people who have been deprived of opportunities - those with disability, women who are below poverty line and border cases of autism. Vindhya is catering to a range of customers across India and servicing them in data processing and voice processing. It is run by Y.S. Pavithra, a young woman in her late thirties.

Sudarshan Iyengar

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COVER STORY

RISING ANGER

Events that began at the Jamia Millia University have resulted in nationwide protests against compromising India's secular and plural character. An angry middle class has taken to the streets.

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Take it back

Widespread opposition to the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and plans for a proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC) is reason enough not to implement them. The government would do well to withdraw the CAA and drop the idea of an NRC.

Neither can work without popular support and if they are imposed in the manner now being considered, we risk throwing the entire country into a long and distressing period of turmoil. To thrust them on states would not work and would also weaken the very spirit of federalism on which the country's governance is based.

As we go to press with this issue of the magazine, there have been five days of protests of the kind that we haven't witnessed for some years since the India Against Corruption movement. The people coming out range from ordinary folk to film stars — all of whom are clearly distressed over the possibility of India losing its secular identity. In addition, scientists, scholars, writers and so on have signed petitions opposing the CAA and NRC.

The CAA is an example of how laws don't necessarily reflect what people want even when passed by majorities in both houses of parliament. The fact that the CAA and NRC were in the BJP's manifesto in the last elections, in which it got a whopping majority, hardly matters as we can see from the anger and anguish over what could be the implications of implementing both.

The recent developments also show that we need to allow greater freedoms on our campuses. The tendency to clamp down on students is counterproductive. The brutal assault on Jamia Millia Islamia's students in their library and toilets has shocked the nation.

Apar Gupta of the Internet Freedom Foundation tells us what is wrong with the draft Data Protection Bill that has been presented by the government. How our personal data is accessed and used should be a matter of concern to us all. Gupta is a lawyer and an activist in the digital space. He is concerned that the draft bill does little to empower people and gives too much to the State. It is an imbalance we should not accept.

Cities interest this magazine hugely. Stories abound in issues of everyday governance. In Kolkata we learn how its traffic problem was sorted out and in Chandigarh the mayor tells us about his determination to get rid of a garbage hill.

Our Business section features a company making biodegradable plates and cutlery, an enormously useful business given the urban problem of dealing with waste. All kinds of new-age businesses make our lives better and more interesting and we take a keen interest in them wherever we find them. So it is in Goa we have come across a young company which has turned walks into an enterprise thereby offering visitors and locals alike new insights into Goa's heritage and way of life.

*Shree Anand*



SHREY GUPTA



Apar Gupta: 'There is no proposal, within this data protection framework, to reform surveillance laws in India'

# 'Bill on data gives little to citizens and far too much to the State'

## Apar Gupta on privacy and the rights of individuals

Civil Society News  
New Delhi

**R**IGHT through the debate on Aadhaar, the absence of a law on data protection found repeated mention. When the Supreme Court weighed in, it set up the Justice B.N. Srikrishna Committee to this specific end.

Finally, the committee's report and draft law and the government's Bill in the Lok Sabha have arrived, but how much better off are ordinary folk who have to deal with the authorities on the one hand and powerful private businesses on the other?

Not much better off, says Apar Gupta, executive director of the Internet Freedom Foundation, who has put on hold his private practice as a lawyer to be an activist in the digital space.

The law is a welcome step forward but it does little to address many of the problems that exist because of the all-pervasive access to personal data, which is then open to misuse.

Gupta spoke to *Civil Society* at his office in Delhi from where the Internet Freedom Foundation currently operates till it shifts to its own premises in preparation for the many battles that lie ahead.

**Recently we read about how the privacy of journalists and activists was violated by a spyware called Pegasus. Now a Data Protection Bill has been drafted by the Union government. How do you rate this Bill? Does it protect the personal data of individuals?**

First of all, we need to understand the centrality of personal data. In an increasingly digitised society each element of our daily activity generates data since it intersects, in some way or the other, with a process that leads to the collection and creation of personal data. Secondly, the entitlements and disabilities which are, as a result, visited on us as individuals is then on the basis of personal data.

So data has become central to our welfare as human beings, to our mental health, physical

entitlements, our bodies, and our relationships with other human beings, including family, friends and foes, and also in all professional settings, trade and commerce. Briefly, data is central to our existence today.

We need to look at whether the legal system by itself has adequate protection and what are the protections that are actually needed. The one central goal such protections should serve is to protect the individual and give you a sense of control over your own life, autonomy and dignity. So if your data is used in a way in which it classifies you as a person with certain attributes, does that violate your autonomy and ability to make choices that concern you?

These core features were articulated by the Supreme Court in 2017 by a nine-judge bench in the Right to Privacy judgment on August 24.

The Court noted that to provide a framework that can make the high principles of the Constitution actionable we need legislation that lists specific

protections including restrictions on the government and private bodies. We also need a regulatory body which can come up, first, with ways to make such protections actionable; and secondly — since this is a large area — a great degree of specificity and guidance for different stakeholders such as corporations, small and midsize businesses, NGOs, non-profits or the government itself.

So you need practice guidelines on how these entities can use your data within these protections and limitations. There should also be a system of providing remedy to an individual. If limitations and protections are not respected by people using our personal data, it should be possible to hold them to account and place deterrent mechanisms. Individuals should finally have proactive control, a place to complain and obtain remedy. This is a revolutionary act of legislation. Just like how labour and environmental standards followed industrialisation, data protection today grows out of digitisation.

**And does the Draft Protection Bill do all this?**

Yes, but only to a degree of insufficiency. It is a warm blanket that fails to cover the head and the limbs. The draft Bill made available recently has several core defects. It is a regressive departure from the base version, which was the output of the Justice Srikrishna Committee set up by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology late last year. Even this committee made grievous errors, which have now been compounded by the government draft that has been introduced in the Lok Sabha and is now before a joint parliamentary committee headed by Meenakshi Lekhi.

The Justice Srikrishna Committee gave two outcome documents. The first was an expert committee report and the second was a draft data protection Bill. There are specific omissions and conflicts within the Bill when you look at it from a rights-based perspective, which means protection of the individual.

First, the process. The draft version of the Bill has been baked in secret. So we lack a degree of transparency throughout its drafting process. After the Justice Srikrishna Committee submitted its version of the Bill the government opened up public consultation. Stakeholders sent in comments. Yet these comments, and the responses to them by the government, were not made public. It lacked any substantive transparency.

We also know through press leaks that the relevant government ministries invited private stakeholder meetings. Who met them, what submissions were made and how changes were carried out remain unanswered questions. Further, when the Data Protection Bill was introduced in Parliament it should have ideally gone to a Standing Committee that is constituted as a standing body that is already looking at the issue of personal data and citizens' privacy. However, in a peculiar departure from process, the government, within minutes of its introduction, formulated a separate joint parliamentary committee and proposed members. These moves do not inspire confidence.

Now, coming to the substance, the text of the Bill has very severe lacunae. For instance, it doesn't deal with any kind of surveillance reform. It only deals with data protection. Data protection conventionally deals only with issues arising when a data collector

or processor takes your data with your consent. It does not apply to those circumstances where your data is collected, aggregated and utilised without your consent but is legally permitted. When data is utilised without your consent, but is legally permitted, it is called surveillance. When it is done with your consent then there are additional protections called 'data protection'.

So, the Srikrishna Committee only looked at data protection. Although the report says surveillance, it does not deal with instances such as the NSO group Pegasus hack. It does not deal with instances when the government asks foreign platforms for our personal data for putting people under surveillance. It does not apply any kind of measures when the government may be surveilling us or even in cases where they may be seeking this information from a third party. This is why, according to us, that (Srikrishna draft) Bill is incomplete and deficient.

This problem is further compounded by the Data Protection Bill introduced by the government. It allows the government to exempt any government department from its application. This is incredible because here arguably even departments which are expected to obtain consent for collecting and

place the individual at the centre. Digital rights groups have quite often drawn inspiration from the panopticon proposed by Jeremy Bentham — a central guard tower in the architecture of a prison. All the prisoners are visible at all times to a guard who sits in the tower. Even if the guard is unable to view all prisoners at all times, the prisoners cannot observe the guard and so they always presume that they are under watch. It causes a change in their behaviour. They believe they are being policed all the time. Of course, Foucault developed this much further.

So I think what is being created today are more and more digital panopticons in which people will be observed at all points of time. All elements of their behaviour, socially and digitally, will be catalogued, indexed, profiled, surveyed — leading to terrible outcomes. It can be associated with a degree of profiling which is already taking place for the availability of several services because there is a large amount of commercial interest attached to this kind of activity.

So surveillance won't apply only to dissidents, activists or civil society actors who work on rights-based issues or challenge the over-breadth of

**'I think what is being created today are more and more digital panopticons in which people will be observed at all points of time. All elements of their behaviour, socially and digitally, will be catalogued, indexed, profiled.'**

processing personal data with consent can fall completely outside the Bill's ambit.

**The government is asking for sensitive personal data to be stored locally in India. Does this protect the individual?**

The government wants data, which is classified as sensitive personal data, to be stored locally in India. Such data requires a higher degree of protection. The mere siting of this data will not automatically give a higher degree of protection.

Let us presume data can be nationally segregated and stored in servers in India. This presumes capacity for identification and then cost, where the data processor is able to, after identifying nationality, store it in India — then are there enough servers in India, and, further, security. A lot of all this is lacking. So if our data is kept here and we don't have any surveillance reform, instances such as Pegasus can happen. There is no proposal, within this data protection framework, to reform surveillance laws in India. In fact, it contains a dangerous power for the government to exempt itself.

At best what this draft is doing is making the job of the government much easier in requesting our data because it can strong-arm and muscle its way since the data is being stored in India.

**So it is the State versus the individual. How do you protect the citizen? The State also has the biggest database of citizens in the world in the Aadhaar database.**

I think the way we look at personal data has to be from the perspective of theories of power, which

government power. It will apply to every ordinary Indian citizen who seeks to avail of perhaps an insurance product that requires him or her to submit consent for their digital record. Or a request for their dietary habits and patterns which can be easily queried from the many food delivery apps which reside in our phones.

It can, and is already being used by algorithms, for micro-lending services which are offering credit on the basis of personal data. Even if they are not basing it only on personal data, it is one of the elements they use to assess risk. It will be used by political parties to spend immense amounts of money to micro-target specific messages based on your online profile to make you vote for them. In sum it will control your mind, body and wallet.

**How do you address that?**

You do that through legislative intervention. Whenever there are market failures, which happen in how our society operates on the basis of informational transactions, there needs to be an intervention to correct these imbalances. We often talk about incentives and law is an important measure to create a system or a framework to make a society work towards its constitutional goals. That is why data protection that protects the individual — not the State or a corporation — is so important.

In several respects the present Bill does not do that. For example, there is no provision within the Bill to ensure that legal impacts on the basis of data collection and processing are assessed by a data impact assessment — how data collection and

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processing will impact rights. This is a provision in Europe's General Data Protection Regulation.

It was absent in the draft that was proposed by Justice Srikrishna. Legal impacts cannot disqualify people, who are otherwise qualified, to avail of a government subsidy or benefit such as their monthly rations, cooking fuel, or an education entitlement. These would be core deficiencies which would manifest in communities that are disadvantaged and already lack social power and education to negotiate once the system fails them. They don't have systems to even seek formal legal remedy.

#### There is no grievance redressal system.

Yes and that's why this provision is very important. This is lacking right now in the Bill. Also, the Internet Freedom Foundation, along with civil society actors, has actually put together a draft which has been filed as a private member's Bill first by Dr Shashi Tharoor in the (monsoon) session of Parliament and been introduced in this session of Parliament, and the second is by Dr Ravi Kumar of the DMK, which is a much more developed draft with the same level of political principles to provide this level of protection. So our parliamentarians

**'Legal impacts can't disqualify people, otherwise qualified, from availing of a government subsidy or benefit such as their rations.'**

have been engaging quite actively on this issue and are keenly aware of the impact of the Data Protection Bill.

Another provision, which has been missing from the government's proposals till date, has been to notify the individual in case data and security are breached in an unauthorised manner. Rather, the government wants such notification to be given to the Data Protection Authority. This is a repeated theme in the structure of the government Bill, which reduces the accountability of those who hold our personal data and our rights over them.

If your login details are stolen from your bank account, at present, the bank is under no level of obligation to inform you because there is no regulatory requirement. Such a system is certainly inequitable. It is in the interest of the bank to maintain its credibility and trust with all its customers by disclosing such a breach to its customers.

We are living in a society where people who view data in a very transactional manner call it the new oil, an analogy that equates it to commerce. So not to have protection or even notify a person, whose data is leaked or breached or runs the immense risk of identity theft and financial frauds, is symptomatic of a deeply inequitable and shortsighted system. Data, in many ways, is the extension and a catalogue

of our personality. Each individual has an inherent and natural right over it. This is primarily valuable not because it is an item of commerce, but because it holds immense power and control over the people to whom it relates.

**We tend to worry about the State. But if you see the number of companies doing surveillance on you and me, in a continuous flow, this requires a concept of governance to which we haven't managed to evolve.**

We need data protection. Quite often the argument being made is that because there are large platforms in Silicon Valley companies, which are gathering our data pervasively, let the government gather more data and create a public database of individuals, which will then be available for Indian companies. Such reasoning is absurd and is an expression of a competitive race to the bottom. A democratic republic should not take lessons from exploitative foreign companies, but instead construct its own constitutional values.

Unfortunately, there is a fundamental disconnect to this in the present policy pronouncements. India's response has been to make a tepid data protection law, which does not rein in pervasive data collection. The question is how do we still use these platforms and get back control and choice? That conversation is not happening. I completely agree that the private sector is actually profiling us much more than the government. They need to be held to account. Finally, who do I look to in terms of a remedy? Who do I pay my taxes to? Who do I look towards to govern and correct these malpractices? I am a citizen of India. I am not a citizen of Google.

**What would you say about the creators of this system, all of whom come out of the private sector?**

The private sector is deeply aware of this argument and more introspective than it was even a few months ago. The first reason is that there is a great deal of criticism of this model of pervasive personal data collection.

Founders have a desire to create companies and products, which will be trusted by their users. These are largely people who are very well educated with a high degree of ambition. They want to be remembered as people who created something of value, of use and convenience and provided employment to a large number of people and were thereby recognised by society as creators. I think it is this status that is under stress today.

The challenge for them is to take a system which has commoditised personal data and shift it to alternative systems of value creation in which they can discover and sustain these large businesses. If you see some of their Twitter feeds they are quite open to criticism and respectful of individual privacy. Silicon Valley founders and even our local founders in Bangalore are having introspective conversations with each other. It's not an amoral industry. They don't want to be seen as tobacco companies in the larger course of history but as innovators and value providers to society.

The second and more immediate criticism which is leading to introspection is the fracture of trust between users and the platform that gathers their data. If users lose trust in you they will shift to another platform as soon as they can. ■

# Mayor gets set to demolish hill of garbage



Chandigarh's massive garbage dump

**Raj Machhan**  
Chandigarh

CHANDIGARH's mayor, Rajesh Kumar Kalia, is a contented man. His dream project of getting the city's massive garbage dump cleared from Daddu Majra, a locality near Sector 38 West, is finally becoming a reality.

"This project has been my life's ambition, the culmination of long years of my political struggle. I am most satisfied that I have been able to initiate this change," he says.

Making this mountain of garbage vanish will, no doubt, be a feather in the mayor's cap. But 46-year-old Kalia has a more deep-seated, personal reason for getting this waste cleared.

His family, comprising five siblings and his parents, lived in this locality, in the vicinity of this garbage dump, for many years after they moved to the city in 1977.

"After living in a hutment in the Sector 25 *jhuggis*, we moved to Daddu Majra in 1984. My father was uneducated and it was a challenge making ends meet," he recalls. So the family took to rag-picking, collecting paper and other reusable waste from the garbage dump nearby. This went on for a few years, but destiny had other plans.

Kalia never gave up going to school, where he proved to be a good sportsman. "I was interested in politics from the very beginning and it was my interest in sports that gave an impetus to my leadership skills." After passing Class 12 in 1991, he devoted himself to politics and emerged as the leader of Chandigarh's Valmiki community. Kalia

held various positions within and outside the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). He quickly rose through the ranks, eventually becoming mayor of India's most planned city.

As per official estimates, the Daddu Majra garbage dump has accumulated 'legacy waste' weighing a whopping 500,000 tonnes and rising to a height of 12 metres at places. Kalia has witnessed first-hand the way the land here was transformed into its present state.

"It was a shame. The garbage dump emanated a foul stench and people regularly fell ill due to various diseases," Kalia said. During rainfall, the waste mixed with the water to produce leachate — a disease-causing toxic liquid that percolated through the soil, rendering the groundwater unfit for human consumption.

**THE CLEAN-UP DRIVE:** In 2005 Chandigarh was one of the first cities in India to get a garbage processing plant. Set up by the Jaypee Group, the plant had the capacity to process 500 tonnes of waste per day. This was the amount of garbage generated by the city on a daily basis, so the plant was seen as a solution to its problem of waste.

Municipal corporation officials, however, say the plant at best functioned, on average, at merely 25 to 30 percent of its capacity. Over the years, it ended up adding to the volume of accumulated waste.

N.K. Vohra, the plant manager of Jaypee, disputes these calculations. "The plant is fully operational," he says. "But we cannot do anything about unsegregated waste. We cannot process construction waste, horticulture waste, cow dung and other such



The city's mayor, Rajesh Kumar Kalia

items that have been dumped into our facility. This is a municipal solid waste plant and that has been our brief from day one."

Just across the road from the processing plant lies the dumping ground. The long-standing tiff between the city's municipal corporation and the plant authorities has led to the accumulation of vast quantities of untreated waste in the compound of the plant itself.

Under a new Smart City initiative, the Chandigarh authorities have now chalked up an ambitious plan to clear the dump and free up the 25 acres of prime city land on which it stands for more productive purposes.

N.P. Sharma, general manager of Chandigarh Smart City Ltd (CSCL), says, "The project is now within the ambit of the Chandigarh Smart City programme. We are deploying scientific mining to

clear the dump. We will remove the waste and deploy the reusable by-products suitably."

To clear the garbage, CSCL has awarded the 'clean up' contract to a private company at a cost of ₹33 crore. The task is to be completed within a period of one and a half years. Sharma says that the company has already started setting up a segregation facility near the dumping ground. "The sheds are being built and we expect the facility to become operative by January 1," he says.

**THREE CATEGORIES:** The legacy waste has broadly been classified into three categories — Construction and Demolition waste (C and D waste), municipal solid waste and industrial/commercial waste to be used for Refuse-derived Fuel (RDF) and fibre waste.

Of the 500,000 tonnes, the dumping ground is estimated to contain 150,000 tonnes of C and D waste, 150,000 tonnes of RDF-compliant waste, 150,000 tonnes of fibre waste, and 50,000 tonnes of plastic and mixed waste. The compostable waste is

**The Daddu Majra garbage dump has waste weighing a whopping 500,000 tonnes and rising to 12 metres.**

to be transported in batches to the nearby segregation site and treated in the sun for seven days. Next, it will be put on conveyor belts with sieves and other separating mechanisms for segregation. The 150,000 tonnes of segregated C and D waste will be transported to the municipal corporation's existing processing plant in Chandigarh's industrial area. Sharma says that the plant has already been producing sand, tiles, gravel and bricks for public use.

The RFD waste is to be transported to nearby cement plants, where it will be burnt to produce energy. "This has been made mandatory for them under law," says Sharma. The fibre material is more of a challenge. As per plan it will be disposed of in waste pits in low-lying areas of Chandigarh's southern sectors.

"We are scouting for a suitable site. Since Chandigarh is a landlocked city, we are still in the process of finalising a landfill for this purpose," says Sharma. The residual 50,000 tonnes of plastic and mixed waste are proposed to be treated at a small plant to be set up for the purpose.

After mandatory treatment with bio agents, the Daddu Majra waste dumping site will be transformed into a public ground which could be used for creating a public park and other civic installations. And, hopefully, Mayor Rajesh Kumar Kalia's ambition of a city without the eyesore of a massive garbage dump will be realised. ■



# How Kolkata traffic police made roads safer with four Es

Subir Roy  
Kolkata

THERE has been a remarkable fall in road accidents in Kolkata and the rest of West Bengal since 2016 which is reflected in the tally of fatal accidents. This has been enabled by a special campaign involving the four 'Es' of education, enforcement, engineering and emergency. But new attitudes need time to take root and what has worked most till now, say road users, is stricter policing and rigorous levying of fines.

In the case of Kolkata, fatal accidents fell by 5.8 percent in 2016 over the previous year and then again in 2017 by another 18 percent. Thereafter, in 2018 they fell by a further 11 percent. Cumulatively, during the 2015-18 period, fatal accidents have gone down by a massive 31 percent.

The figures over the past two years (2018-19) indicate a plateauing but that is to be expected as after an initial sharp decline when a new regime is introduced, the same pace cannot be maintained continuously.

The trend is the same in the case of West Bengal where the inflection occurred in 2017. After a rise in fatalities by 5.2 percent in 2016, there was a sharp fall of 14.5 percent in 2017. Then plateauing occurred in 2018 with the number of fatalities being about the same as in the previous year.

This fall in road accidents in West Bengal has been attributed to the launch in July 2016 of the highly visible campaign "safe drive save life" which is supposed to be Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's idea. The full picture is that the chief minister set the ball rolling by according high priority to improving road safety. The actual campaign was devised on ideas which came from across the board — police officers working with communications agencies.

The result of this is that the idea of improving road safety has caught on with the police. Earlier, the police took road accidents to be "monocausal" (the result of a single cause) — traffic rule violation — explains Vivek Sahay, additional director general of police, traffic. Breaking traffic rules was a criminal offence (though a petty one sometimes) and when that happened the police began investigating, looking for motivation or cause. But now the emphasis has shifted to promoting safety on the roads.

The campaign for road safety launched in West Bengal has resulted from "reducing deaths and injuries from traffic accidents" being adopted globally in 2015 as one of the Sustainable Development Goals. To take this forward the

Union transport ministry has channelled to the states funds received from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank for the purpose.

These additional funds have made a big difference to the states though they represent a minuscule portion of the funds spent each year by the states and the centre on building roads. In the case of West Bengal, enforcement support funding to the police from the state government rose from ₹3-4 crore in 2014-15 to ₹75 crore in 2017-18.

Among the four 'Es' of the programme, education involves telling tomorrow's citizens and today's road users like drivers the importance of following road safety rules. Enforcement involves punishing those who break the law. Engineering involves using modern technology and tools to improve road safety. Emergency involves beefing up emergency services like using the golden hour and equipping roadside health centres to take care of road accident victims.

Emphasis on education has resulted in a huge rise in school visits by police to carry forward the message on road safety. Road safety campaigns have been held by the police in both Kolkata and across West Bengal round the year. Counselling is done for drivers segregated into different categories — like those of buses, ambulances and so on — as their roles are different.

As for enforcement, it is the job of the long arm of the law. Police enforcement of traffic rules is today far stricter. This is starkly visible in Kolkata where there has been a sharp rise in policemen and police motorbikes at innumerable street crossings and an equally sharp rise in levying of fines for violations — issuing of *challans*.

Earlier, in West Bengal districts the sole focus of the traffic police was to address congestion, particularly during festivities. Now it covers policing the entire range of traffic offences. Compared to the earlier minuscule staff strength to address traffic issues, today the deployment is far bigger. Earlier, the West Bengal police had no guidance on traffic. Today there is a far bigger budget to support more manpower and the cultural challenge of changing the mindset of road users is being actively pursued.

The engineering initiative has resulted in better and more CCTV cameras being used. Breathalysers have been introduced in a big way to check drunk driving. Electronic guns are being used to check over-speeding. Vehicle speed is being played back to drivers through roadside digital electronic displays. As a result, a great deal of digital traffic data is being captured today, enabling analysis and learning. This helps identify accident blackspots and engineering specific solutions for them.



A billboard put up by the police propagating safe driving



A policeman pulls up a driver for violating traffic rules

But there is still a key deficit. There is little progress in engineering roads to ensure traffic safety. For example, when the Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority or the PWD builds a road, does it have traffic safety in mind? A key flaw which still survives is roads being designed keeping in mind the needs of motorists and not pedestrians and two-wheelers, to say nothing of cyclists.

The fourth leg in promoting road safety, emergency, has resulted in a programme to educate those working in stalls like eateries along highways to give first-aid, including artificial resuscitation, to trauma victims and do all else that is necessary to get a victim to the nearest medical centre. Kolkata has a new set of trauma care ambulances called Karma which can be called through the traffic helpline. What needs urgent attention is the capacity and quality of health facilities along highways passing through rural areas.

Outlining the technological changes that have taken place, most prominently in Kolkata, Pandey

PICTURES BY ANKIT DATTA



A police station with colourful posters

Santosh, deputy commissioner, traffic, Kolkata Police, contrasts then and now. Then, traffic violation notices were sent by post. This has been digitised. Now a case is registered on the spot through a mobile application, traceable at the central server. The person being prosecuted immediately gets a feedback through an SMS.

Now there are a lot more CCTV cameras, 1,600 for traffic, making monitoring easier. There are speed cameras functioning at 40 locations and RLVD (red light violation detector) cameras. All are automatic number plate reader cameras. So there is no need for human intervention. A violation is automatically registered and intimation goes to the person concerned through the registered mobile number. At the control room, a group keeps a watch on the overall situation through CCTV cameras and prosecution is launched there itself.

Now there is a programmable signalling system which can synchronise all traffic signals in an area for intervention from the control room to smoothen traffic flow and reduce waiting time at signals.

Signage and road markings have been improved.

Road users affirm that the use of information technology to promote road safety is very much a work in progress. Reengineering roads to create bicycle tracks is yet to begin in Kolkata, not to speak of the district towns. Outside of Kolkata, progress itself negatively affects road safety at times. There has been a huge rise in expressways over the years which have created hazards for rural people not used to negotiating wide roads with speeding cars.

Educating the public has a long way to go. Unnecessary honking is the rule rather than the exception for most drivers. The police is trying to ensure that those who ride bikes wear helmets but there also compliance is low.

The police itself has a long way to go. At many important crossings there is confusion because several policemen try to do a good job by manually controlling traffic while simultaneously the traffic lights are kept on. Drivers get confused when they find traffic policemen manually asking them to do one thing but the traffic lights signal something different. ■

## Samita's World

by SAMITA RATHOR







SHREY GUPTA

Winners of the 20th edition of the NCPEDP-Mindtree Helen Keller Awards with Rajiv Kumar, vice chairman, Niti Aayog (back row, seventh from left)

# Awards celebrate skills and jobs

**Sidika Sehgal**  
New Delhi

**A**DITI Verma runs a café in Mumbai called Aditi's Corner. M. Ummul Khair studied law and then set up a legal aid centre for persons with disability. Aditi has Down Syndrome and Ummul has cerebral palsy but that hasn't prevented them from realising their dreams.

They were felicitated, along with other achievers, at the 20th edition of the NCPEDP-Mindtree Helen Keller Awards. An initiative of the National Centre for Promotion of Employment of Disabled People (NCPEDP), the awards recognise individuals, NGOs and corporates for their work in promoting employment for people with disabilities.

The mood was celebratory at the event, held on December 2, at the India Habitat Centre. The chief guest this year was Rajiv Kumar, vice chairman, NITI Aayog. He said, "I hope the awards serve as an example to all of us. These efforts do not get the visibility they deserve."

Arman Ali, executive director of NCPEDP, said their next step is to take the awards to tier 2 and tier 3 cities. Data on disability and people with disability is still insufficient and sometimes incorrect, said Som Mittal, NCPEDP's chairman. "The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 is recognised as the most progressive Act in the world. We need the same zest in implementing it," he said.

The awards are supported by Mindtree. Debashis Chatterjee, managing director and CEO at Mindtree, remarked that every year, the number of nominations for the awards increase, a sure sign that things are changing.

Other guests were Tarika Roy from the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities and Arvind Gupta, non-executive director, Larsen & Toubro.

The event would have been incomplete without mention of Javed Abidi, founder-director of NCPEDP, who passed away in 2018. "His mere presence was a driving force in the sector," said Akhil Paul of Sense International India, one of the awardees.

The awards were announced under three categories.

**ROLE MODELS / PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**  
**Shriram Parthasarathy** is Marketing Communications Manager with Microsoft India. He has been making Microsoft India's websites and their social media content 100 percent accessible. He is also responsible for conducting sensitisation and awareness workshops for Microsoft employees. **Vincent Saraiwala**, a postgraduate from the Indian Institute of Management in Bengaluru, works for Big Bazaar in Mumbai. He has been making retail stores accessible for people with disabilities. This includes providing assistive services and designing spaces for greater accessibility. He also leads training and sensitisation programmes for over 30,000 Big Bazaar employees.

**Aditi Verma** runs Aditi's Corner, a café in Mumbai with two support staff. She is involved in sales, customer engagement and managing the inventory. She hopes to use space in the café to train people with special needs so that they can become self-reliant. The support of her family has been crucial and Aditi plans to extend the same help to others.

**M. Ummul Khair**, who has cerebral palsy, graduated with a law degree from Dr Ambedkar Government Law College, Chennai. She works as an advocate and at the Disability Legislation Unit in Chennai on advocacy, inclusion, education and employment for persons with disabilities. She has set up a Legal Aid Cell for persons with disability under the State Legal Services Authority in Chennai.

**ROLE MODELS FOR JOB CREATION**  
**Surender Singh** has been working as a special educator for 19 years. At Muskaan, a non-profit, he developed a vocational and life skills curriculum as well as training modules for adults with disabilities. He has also designed a training process to facilitate placement of 48 adults with Down Syndrome in companies like Lemon Tree Hotels, Radisson Country Inns & Suites, Four Point Sheraton, Hindustan Petroleum, Microsoft, Jubilant and CBRE, a real estate company.

**Avinash Dugar** is founder and CEO of La Gravitea, a café in Jamshedpur. The café employs hearing impaired boys and girls who are first put through a training programme where they learn to prepare food and beverages, and manage other operations of a café.

**Alina Alam** started Mitti Café in Bengaluru in 2017 to help persons with disabilities find a sustainable and dignified means of livelihood. The café is run and managed by people with disabilities. Mitti Café also trains its staff for the roles in which they are employed.

**COMPANIES / NGOS / INSTITUTIONS**  
**The Association of People with Disability** in Bengaluru has been working with persons with disabilities since 1959. They impart skill training in hospitality, retail, office management, and on sensitising employers for moving towards inclusion. Till date, their work has impacted more than 500,000 people with disabilities.

**Sense International India** is working in 22 states in the country with over 78,000 children and adults with deafblindness. Deafblindness is a disability in which the individual can have varying degrees of hearing and visual impairment. Sense India has trained and found jobs for 500 young adults.

**Subros Ltd., Manesar** has an equal opportunity policy in place to empower people with disabilities. They have collaborated with non-profit organisations for recruitment of people with disability. After conducting job mapping surveys, they identified 10-12 areas in which they can recruit people with disabilities.

**Vishal Mega Mart** in Gurgaon employs more than 700 people with disability as store associate, billing associate, receptionist and department manager. They are employed in 282 locations across 28 states and Union Territories. Back in 2012, there were only 21 people with disabilities. That number has grown exponentially.

**Infosys** has partnered with organisations like Business Disability International in the UK and the Australia Network for Disability to champion an inclusive and equitable workplace. ■



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## KISAAN MITRA

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# What's a safe city for women?

## Safetipin's index goes beyond policing

Rwit Ghosh  
New Delhi

What are the key factors that make Indian cities safer for women? Safetipin, a social enterprise, together with the Asia Foundation, has formulated guidelines for an index that any city can use and has also released a safety analysis on the three two-tier cities of Bhopal, Gwalior and Jodhpur.

Safetipin provides tech solutions for safer cities. It has Delhi-based mobile apps which identify safer routes for women to get home at night and a 'Track Me' GPS which enables a trusted person to track the route a woman takes. A safety audit, using nine parameters, assesses if a public space is safe or unsafe.

Safetipin has collaborated with the Asia Foundation. The Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) has funded the reports.

This isn't the first index on deciphering what makes a city safe. *The Economist* and Thomson Reuters publish a safety index every year, comparing cities around the world. "We don't do this thing of trying to compare cities. We're trying to give each city tools to improve itself," says Kalpana Vishwanath, co-founder of Safetipin.

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs also has its own index. Vishwanath points out that it looks mainly at police activity and CCTV usage whereas Safetipin's index is more holistic. "Safety is also about the built form. It includes public transport and infrastructure," says Vishwanath.

Their index consists of 23 indicators under four broad categories: land use and built use, public infrastructure, public transportation and security.

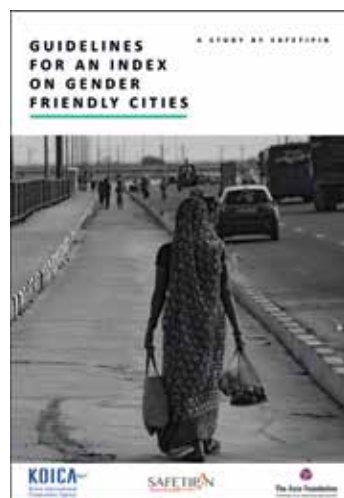
Under land use and built use, 'mixed use' is one of the indicators. The study found mixed-use buildings invariably had socially diverse communities, an active street life and safety. They provided 'eyes on the street'.

One example is old Delhi. There are shops on the ground floor and homes on the second floor. The street is never deserted. "Even at 10.30 pm, a girl can go out with her friends and have *chole bhature* in old Delhi," says Vishwanath.

Other indicators are gated communities, a rising phenomenon in cities, and public parks and plazas. Footpaths, streetlights, pedestrian crossings, hawkers, night shelters and toilets are some indicators used to assess public infrastructure.



Kalpana Vishwanath, co-founder of Safetipin



emerged as an important reason for women dropping out of the workforce. More women than men depend on public transport. The way they use public transport is also different. Unlike men, women undertake frequent short trips to go to work, to shop, to pick up children. But transport systems are designed for men to go to work. In the absence of proper transport, a very high percentage of women just walked to work.

Safetipin's two apps, My Safetipin and Safetipin Nite, came in handy for assessing the safety and convenience of a complete journey. Safety Audits were undertaken using nine parameters: Lighting, Openness, Visibility, Crowd, Security, Walk Path, Availability of Public Transport, Gender Diversity and Feeling.

All three cities ranked poorly with Bhopal doing a bit better at 2.9/5. The city had better lighting but

SHREY GUPTA

fares poorly on infrastructure at bus stops.

"At bus stops, we found that both lighting and footpaths did not meet standards of safety," says Sonali Vyas, a programme manager at Safetipin.

Gwalior has a better transport network, although most of it consists of privately owned buses, autos and e-rickshaws. "The government needs to regularise informal transport instead of introducing more buses," says Vyas.

According to her, 20 new buses were introduced but because of poor ridership the service was stopped and subsequently the buses were used for electioneering.

Jodhpur, a tourist city, does have many areas which are safe. Vyas says they found that Mandol Garden, slightly outside the city, was deserted and unsafe. "We suggested increasing police patrols in that area," says Vyas.

The report has made a series of recommendations. Some are broad ones meant for all three cities and others are specific to each city.

Gwalior, for example, needs better footpaths and lighting along with public transport infrastructure and overall visibility. "I do believe that if you improve urban form, you can improve inclusion," says Vishwanath.

An important recommendation the report makes is to feminise the transport sector. For that, infrastructure will need to change. For example, you would need public toilets for women drivers. Such changes require policy interventions, says Vyas.

However, a radical overhaul of the transport sector isn't required. Instead, says Vishwanath, city transport systems need to be made seamless. "Last-mile connectivity really needs to get traction," says Vishwanath. "At the HUDA City Metro station in Gurgaon, a police booth was installed. It was active from 5 pm to 8 pm. Autos were organised. Women waited in line and got an auto to their destination without trouble," says Vishwanath.

Recently, Safetipin undertook a study on Delhi with the Delhi government. In an earlier study, they had identified 7,000 dark spots in the city. Their recent survey in 2018-19 showed that more than 4,000 of these had been fixed. "We found that dark spots have gone down to less than 3,000," remarks Vishwanath.

Safetipin has been lobbying with urban local bodies to implement some of their suggestions. "We have spoken to the CEO of the Smart Cities programme in both Gwalior and Bhopal," says Vishwanath. ■

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# ‘Pay brick kiln workers online’

Sidika Sehgal  
New Delhi

BRICK kiln workers have finally found a voice in the National Struggle Committee of Brick Kiln Workers (NSCBKW) floated in October last year. On December 6 NSCBKW organised a demonstration at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi with a charter of demands which address the issues facing brick kiln workers.

The industry is part of the unorganised sector and follows no regulation. It has, for long, become synonymous with labour exploitation, child labour, bonded labour, appalling working conditions and pollution. Nearly a quarter of a million children are working in the brick kiln industry, according to estimates.

This was NSCBKW’s first protest in the national capital. Representatives subsequently met the minister for labour, Santosh Kumar Gangwar, and presented their charter of demands to him.

Ashok Khandelwal, national adviser of the NSCBKW, says changing the way workers are paid can put an end to bonded labour. The solution is to implement existing laws.

## What was the outcome of your meeting with the labour minister?

We are not very happy with the response. We have submitted a memorandum in which we have highlighted a few of our demands. The first issue we are trying to tackle is the high incidence of bonded labourers in the brick kiln industry.

## How many bonded labourers are there?

We believe that the minimum number of brick kiln workers in India is five million. But that is a conservative estimate. In October, we held a national consultation in Delhi. We invited many employers’ associations also. They claimed that there are 1.5 lakh brick kilns which employ 25 million workers.

Our first demand has to do with the high incidence of bonded labour. Section 15 of the Wage Code says that payment of wages to workers can be made by cheque or cash. We want the Union government to issue a notification mandating that the brick kiln industry pay workers by cheque or online. Section 17 says that the payment should be as per the wage period. The maximum wage period as per law is one month. We are asking for monthly payment of wages. If this demand is met and can be ensured, then there will be no bondage in the brick kiln industry.

## Basically, you don’t want the money to be paid in cash.

Yes. The government too talks about financial inclusion. They want payments to be made through a formal process.

The other demand is also about payment of wages. Bondage mostly exists in the moulding operation of the brick kilns, an activity which prepares raw bricks. About 60 to 65 percent of the total workers in the industry are moulders. They



Brick kiln workers protest in Delhi

are mostly migrants who are hired through contractors.

Usually these workers are from undeveloped areas like Bolangir in Odisha, Bilaspur in Chhattisgarh and so on. These are places where employment is a problem and people are in distress. During the off-season, they don’t have work. There is a network of contractors through whom an advance payment is given and recruitment is done under certain conditions.

The main condition is that they will work for the entire period of the season, roughly six to eight months, usually from October till June. These conditions are only oral, by the way, nothing is written.

The other condition is that the workers’ accounts will not be settled till the end of the season. So the workers are not paid wages. Instead, they are given some expenses to buy food every 10 days or quarterly or weekly, whatever the practice is. In the process, they lose their freedom. And that is how they become bonded. This condition is not a relic of the old bondage, of feudal bondage. It has been termed modern slavery and some people call it neo-bondage.

## So, by breaking the way they are paid, you break the system of bondage.

Exactly.

## You are also asking for a time rate minimum wage rather than a piece rate minimum wage.

There are two problems with wages. The first is that the entire work is done by husband and wife, and sometimes children — a work unit. The payment is made to the head of the family who is the male. The work is done jointly but the woman is not even considered a worker. Therefore, she is not paid wages.

The second is the piece rate. Now piece rate wage has a problem. Our law says that the payment has to be on the basis of time. The Wage Code says that the piece rate wage has to be in relation to time wage. But piece rate in the brick industry is determined totally arbitrarily. There’s no relation between piece

rate and time wage.

We got a study done by IIT Mumbai. It said that in eight hours, one adult, on an average, can make about 480 bricks. That means for 1,000 bricks, the minimum rate should be twice the rate for eight hours. That system is not followed anywhere. There is total anarchy as far as wages are concerned.

The other part is how much should the minimum wage be. One of our demands was that the minimum wage should be fixed scientifically. We have arrived at a figure of ₹18,000 per month. Our demand is simple — that the minimum wage should be ₹18,000 or ₹692 per day. If a worker can make 480 bricks in a day, and nearly 1,000 bricks in two days, the minimum wage for 1,000 bricks should be around ₹1,400. Currently, the minimum wage varies from ₹250 to ₹700 in Punjab.

There is one more demand. We have the Employees’ Provident Fund (EPF) Act. In 1980, it was amended and the brick kiln industry was included. Except for a few kilns, nowhere has this Act been implemented. The moment the EPF is implemented, and a worker is given an account number, they can get PF benefits and pension. Then there are other social issues.

## Why are you asking for the Maharashtra Mathadi, Hamal and other Manual Workers’ Act?

Any labour issue is basically an issue between employer and employee. The government as a third and independent party should be there to ensure that the employers are fair to labour. It is presumed in the market economy that the basic motive of employers is profit maximisation, so they will try to extract the maximum out of labour.

Labour needs protection. And their main instrument of protection is unionisation. That’s why we have the Trade Union Act. Unions are required for bargaining with employers. The government should facilitate the relationship between employers and employees. That is what the Mathadi Workers Act does. ■



Ashok Khandelwal

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# AS ANGER GROWS PEOPLE COME OUT

Beginning on Delhi campuses, protesters across cities oppose CAA, NRC, ask for secular India

Civil Society News  
New Delhi

WHEN thousands of students laid siege to the headquarters of the Delhi Police on the cold night of December 15, it was no ordinary protest. They could have been enjoying themselves hanging out someplace else, but instead they chose to be out on the streets risking their personal safety and confronting the police who had just hours earlier beaten up students of the Jamia Millia University.

The protesters came in a spontaneous show of solidarity from colleges across Delhi and their vigil with placards denouncing the police and the government continued into the early morning. They were asking for justice, for students picked up by the Delhi Police to be released, and the right to be heard. They voiced their anger against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC), which the Jamia students had raised their voices against.

Campuses have recently witnessed growing unrest over arbitrary hikes in fees and curtailing of freedoms enjoyed by students. Confrontation with the BJP-led government has been growing. Student bodies all over the country have been coming out in support of each other.

The Jamia episode came on top of these tensions on the much graver issues of the CAA and the proposed NRC, which are seen as dividing India on the basis of religious identities.

As the students protested, they became the trigger for a much larger rising tide of anger. Close on the heels of the late night vigil in Delhi, came a spontaneous outcry from all over the country in Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai, Hyderabad, Lucknow, Ahmedabad, Pune, Kolkata, Mangalore and in cities in states of the northeast.

The tens of thousands who showed up at rallies in these cities varied from film stars to students and ordinary folk. They disapproved of the brutal way in which the students of Jamia had been treated. The police had entered the campus, fired teargas, beat up students, smashed windows and destroyed the library.

At another level, students wanted India's secular character, under which all religions are equal, to be preserved.

There was sporadic violence too, noticeably in Uttar Pradesh. But at most demonstrations people expressed their dissent peacefully. In Delhi, students offered the police flowers. But the Union government, which controls the police in Delhi, responded with a heavy hand — declaring a lockdown, blocking Internet and mobile communications and closing metro stations. Protestors were bundled into police vehicles and taken away.

Elsewhere, in BJP-ruled states too there was a crackdown. In Bengaluru, the well-known historian and Gandhi biographer, Ramachandra Guha, was manhandled by police constables as he attempted to protest peacefully—a clip which showed him being pushed around by the police went live across TV channels and added to the increasing international embarrassment of the Union government.

Earlier, other members of the intelligentsia had lodged their protest in a petition to the Narendra Modi government. They came from the Indian Institutes of Technology, the Indian Institutes of Science, Education and Research, Indian Institute of Science, Delhi University, Chennai Mathematical Institute, International Centre for Theoretical Science, Tata Institute of Fundamental Research. Some of the signatories were also affiliated to international institutes such as the University of Bonn, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the University of Oslo.

The petition said: "The idea of India that emerged from the Independence movement, and as enshrined in our Constitution, is that of a country that aspires to treat people of all faiths equally. The use of religion as a criterion for citizenship in the proposed Bill would mark a radical break with this history and would be



Students from colleges all over Delhi protest at India Gate

inconsistent with the basic structure of the Constitution. We fear, in particular, that the careful exclusion of Muslims from the ambit of the Bill will greatly strain the pluralistic fabric of the country."

The proposed NRC will require all Indians to give proof that they are citizens of India by submitting documents. Meeting the NRC's requirements could be a cumbersome process, which may be much beyond poorer citizens who might not have documents like birth certificates and proof of residence. The CAA, on the other hand, distinguishes between refugees on the basis of religion, leaving out Muslims but giving blanket acceptance to Hindus, Jains and Sikhs.

The NRC and CAA taken together could change India's secular character forever and lead to unimaginable social and religious tensions. People worry about detention camps for Muslims who might not have their documents in place.

The Modi government insists that these are unfounded. "Muslims have nothing to fear," Union Home Minister Amit Shah has repeatedly asserted in interviews.

Both measures are mentioned in the BJP's manifesto that brought it to power

SHREY GUPTA

SUJATA KHANNA



Girls at the protest in Mumbai hold up the Indian flag

SHREY GUPTA

**The people who showed up at rallies in these cities varied from film stars to students and ordinary folk. They disapproved of the brutal way students in Jamia had been treated.**

recently. But more than 60 percent of India isn't governed by the BJP and so it isn't speaking for everyone. Already nine states have opposed both the CAA and the NRC. Implementing the NRC would be impossible without the support of the state machineries. An earlier NRC exercise in Assam ended in a fiasco and has had to be scrapped after causing much anguish to people. But people declared illegal migrants are still languishing in detention centres.



Slogans and posters denounce the Modi government





A poster affirms India's secular and plural tradition

Why then has the BJP pursued the NRC and rammed the CAA through Parliament? Is it to merely tick the boxes of its election promises? Or is it, as being alleged, to distract attention from much bigger issues such as chaotic government finances, a sinking economy, lack of jobs, declining rural incomes and environmental problems?

Are these also the issues that have brought people out all over the country with the NRC and CAA being the triggers? Is there a deeper concern that the country is adrift and the government with its brute majority is not consensual enough?

Many celebrities came out in support of the anti-CAA protests across cities. In Mumbai, Farhan Akhtar, Swara Bhaskar, Huma Qureshi, Jim Sarbh, Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra and Raj Babbar joined the protest at August Kranti Maidan.

"This is a demonstration in support of our Constitution and our constitutional values," Bhaskar said when she addressed the rally. Mumbai saw nearly 100,000 people join the protest and the Mumbai Police cooperated with the peaceful protesters.

In Chennai, classical musician and Ramon Magsaysay Award winner T.M. Krishna and actor Siddharth came out on the streets to show solidarity. "I think the message is very clear. This Act, in combination with the NRC, is being done to create a divided country, to create a majoritarian Hindu state. That has never been India civilizationaly. We have to thank the youngsters and the students of this country. They have woken us up," said Krishna.

In Delhi, on December 16, peaceful protests were held at India Gate. Priyanka Vadra and other Congress leaders staged a *dharna* there. But as they left, many more people arrived, congregating at the entry to India Gate. As the crowds grew larger, a policeman used a speakerphone and asked people to disperse from the entry, but to no avail.

Three young men decided to climb up onto the barricades, calling to the crowd. People thronged to them. As the crowd grew louder and threatened to overwhelm the barricades, the police relented, letting people into India Gate, to a roar of approval from the crowd.

On December 17, students of Jamia called a press conference at which they showed the injuries inflicted on them by the police. One of the students had fractures in both arms and bruises on his chest. He was in the library when the police stormed in. In police detention, when he asked for a painkiller, he says he was denied medical care. A woman student said that when a group of students



Thousands of people gathered at the August Kranti Maidan in Mumbai



Protesters camp outside the Delhi Police headquarters on the night of 15 December



A Jamia student who suffered fractures and bruises at a press conference in Delhi



A Jamia student breaks down at the same press conference



The Delhi Police storming into Jamia Millia Islamia

tried to go into a house to escape the police, they were dragged out to the road and beaten with *lathis*.

Another student was speaking to his mother on the phone when the police entered the campus. He told his mother that he might not survive. Students were overwhelmed and broke down as they relived the horrors of the last two days.

Farah Naqvi, a women's rights activist, revealed that when activists and lawyers gathered outside the police station on December 15, they were not allowed to enter. When an activist and a lawyer were allowed inside, their mobile phones were taken away and they were barred from getting the students to sign on any document. In police detention, students were denied access to medical care and when they were finally released at 4 am, they were badly injured, she said.

Anger has been simmering in campuses across India, expressing itself in outbursts now and again. Students in Delhi initially united against police brutality. By taking up the CAA and the NRC, which Jamia's students were agitating against, students highlighted an issue which has been deeply troubling India's people — the erosion of secularism. ■



## Goa's walking company Soul Travelling offers unusual experiences

Ashwini Kamat  
Panaji

WHEN 28-year-old Varun Hegde decided to quit his job in Germany and return to Goa with the vague plan of setting up a sustainable tourism company, almost everybody advised him to reconsider.

His idea met all-round scepticism. Yet, two years later, Hegde's start-up, Soul Travelling, has successfully transformed wanderlust into an unusual enterprise with a promising future.

As an offbeat experiential tourism business, based in Goa, Soul Travelling offers curated walking trails and half-day experiences. These trails include community interactions and a delicious authentic Goan meal or snacks. The team operates over 25 carefully chosen routes across unique locales in the hinterlands of Goa with the intention of highlighting the true essence of Goa.

The tourism sector has been declining of late in Goa after the closure of the booming illegal mining industry. According to the latest figures disclosed by the state government as well as local travel and tour operators, the arrival of tourists, especially foreigners, in Goa has fallen by 18 to 20 percent since 2018.

Contrary to this gloomy picture, registration figures at Soul Travelling seem to be at an all-time high. Their clientele includes Indian travellers, people who have recently relocated to Goa, foreigners and local Goans. "Our core clientele right now are local Goans who have decided to explore their own world with us. At times, we land up learning so much from our Goan guests that it enriches our content further," remarks Hegde.

Raised and educated in Goa, Varun Hegde graduated in 2012 with a bachelor's degree in electronics and telecommunication. In late 2015, he moved to Germany for work. It was during his stay there that he set out on solo travels across 18 countries including France, the Netherlands, Iceland, England, Scotland, Spain, Sweden, Denmark and Austria.

All was going according to plan until one day it dawned on him that travelling and exploring was where his heart truly lay. Hegde quit his job in May 2017 and returned to Margao, his hometown, to start something different in the overcrowded tourism sector of Goa.

What prompted this life-changing decision? "Don't get me wrong," says Hegde. "My work in the IT industry was a lot of fun. The work-life balance was beautiful. There were just some factors which made me return. For instance, in India, our plan is



The Soul Travelling team. Varun Hegde is seated left

**Registration figures at Soul Travelling seem to be at an all-time high. Their clientele includes Indian travellers, people who have recently relocated to Goa, foreigners and local Goans.**

always about working and then if there is time and money left, we end up travelling. But in Europe, I noticed that travel is an integral part of everyone's life. It improves you as a person and improves what

you do in your daily life. I think that this notion needs to gradually seep into Indian life as well."

Once in Goa, Hegde teamed up with some friends and in August 2017, after a month-long brainstorming session, the group settled on what it could do. Ideas such as launching a backpackers' hostel and an aggregator model focussed on tourism were eliminated and the team decided to focus on walking trails, which are now the mainstay of the company.

When Soul Travelling hosted its very first walk on a wintry morning in October 2017 in Margao, only three people turned up. Disappointed, the team had no choice but to return to the drawing board and develop a proper business model. Their hard work paid off and around 26 people attended the second walk organised a week later.

"That is when we realised that only good content is not enough to keep a large group engaged for a long time," Hegde says. What attracted tourists, he realised, was the idea of a wholesome and affordable experience.

Tourists can go on an Old Goa-Christian Art trail for three hours or on a Latin Quarter walk for two hours and 15 minutes or admire the Houses of Goa at Chandor. Also coming up is a Secret Food Trail at Mapusa, The Three Kings Trail in Cansaulim and the Divar Exploration Weekend.

Everyone at Soul Travelling believes that travel should not be a luxury. Rather, it should be within one's means and hence, something that people can do more often. Every day, the enthusiastic bunch works to change the way Goa is portrayed and how tourism is perceived and undertaken in Goa.

"We urgently need to accept that the kind of tourism we have in Goa is unsustainable," says Hegde. "Goa cannot be just a party destination. In the rest of the world, they value everything big and small. In the catacombs of Paris, they have turned a giant ossuary into a tourism spot which generates high revenue." He believes that Goa has a treasury of unexplored unique locations. "There is so much potential in our cultural, historical and natural heritage that can be restored, preserved and marketed well," he argues.

However, this was easier said than done. "It took us a long time to fine-tune a scalable business model to suit our vision of socially conscious hinterland tourism. Walking trails can be boring for a lot of people. So, we have learnt to treat every walk as a product designed to deliver a memorable experience. We now know how and where to launch a new trail, how to pull crowds, work the costing and we are still learning," says Hegde. The company's annual turnover, he says, is around ₹10-11 lakh.

At present, the Soul Travelling website accepts registration for trails and experiences across 25-plus locations covering every major town in Goa. On a weekday, around 15 to 20 spots are available for booking. During the week, 11 trail routes are open and special trail routes are offered over weekends.

Tickets range from ₹399, inclusive of a snack, for a local trail to ₹1,200 for half-day experiences, including an authentic Goan meal and transport. Explaining this system, Hegde says, "We generally pay all the traditional businesspersons who open their workspaces to us for our trails. This is our tiny giveback to them for keeping alive the dying arts of Goa."

Currently, the small team at Soul Travelling includes six full-timers and six part-timers, who conduct the regular walks and 20 local ambassadors, who guide special trails over weekends. The average age of the core team is 26-27 years, the youngest being an 18-year-old college student.

Most team members at Soul Travelling have joined after being regular guests who took part in the trails. At times, aspiring members suggest a new trail route that they could guide. It takes a month or two to recce the trail route, research for content and on-board locals for interactions before launching the new member or a fresh trail. Every trail experience is carefully worked out before offering it to tourists.

The company has come a long way since its first walk and now boasts a complete repertoire of walking trails, food and tavern trails and half-day explorations. Each month is also marked by a "Walk with Legend", when prominent personalities take you down their local lanes and "Safarnama", an intimate gathering of travellers where people share their travel stories through photos, talks, music,



Tourists on a walk through a sylvan Goan village



Varun Hegde and his company's logo



Every walk is designed as a memorable experience

**Tourists can go on an Old-Goa Christian Art Trail, a Latin Quarter Walk, or admire the Houses of Goa at Chandor or even join a Secret Food Trail at Mapusa in North Goa.**

poetry, dance and every other manner of expression. "Festivals of Goa", a series focusing on unique, lesser known festivals celebrated in the villages, has also gained popularity over the past year.

In February 2019, Soul Travelling hosted "Games of Goa", an event showcasing 20 traditional Goan games, both outdoor and indoor, with intriguing names like ticktem and logoriyo. Visitors could learn and play these long-forgotten games, which were researched and documented over a period of two months. The company now uses these games to conduct corporate training and team-building exercises.

In its third year, Soul Travelling is already working on an expansion plan. "We are toying with the idea of taking travellers on journeys to specific locations with subject matter experts. One can then travel to

Egypt with an archaeologist, go on a culinary tour with a chef or a connoisseur and so on. We are also working to expand outside Goa in the next three to four months. We want to involve more people in spreading the idea that tourism can be undertaken differently," says Hegde.

The robust growth of niche travel in Goa indicates that people are slowly moving towards affordable and experiential tourism where they seek something more than mere sight-seeing. "There is a different level of bliss in being able to participate and take a small part of the place back with you. Also, knowing that you have contributed in preserving a world you love is a very empowering part of travel," says the young founder of Soul Travelling. ■

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# Tableware from paddy straw

Rwit Ghosh  
New Delhi

EVERY year Delhi's skies turn extra murky when farmers in Punjab burn paddy stubble to clear their fields. Ecoware is attempting to mitigate some of this air pollution by picking up Punjab's paddy straw and converting it into eco-friendly tableware. A pilot project has been launched with farm aggregators in Punjab.

"Paddy straw has high silica content so it can't be used as fodder for animals. It really has very little value," says Rhea Mazumdar Singhal, founder and CEO of Ecoware, manufacturers of eco-friendly tableware and compostable packaging. Using paddy straw converts it into something useful and lessens stubble burning to some extent.

Ecoware manufactures spoons, forks, plates, trays, containers and more for the food industry. They also make compostable packaging. Their products are natural, biodegradable, eco-friendly and inexpensive.

Singhal founded the company in 2009. At that time there was no ban on single-use plastic and little awareness in the food industry about the harmful effects of plastic packaging and tableware. Today, the situation has reversed. There is huge demand among quick service restaurants, kitchens and e-commerce sites for eco-friendly tableware and biodegradable packaging. In fact, demand is so big it's difficult to estimate the size of this massive market.

The inspiration for Ecoware came from Singhal's father-in-law, Sunil Singhal, a chemical engineer who worked for over 35 years in the sugar industry.

"The idea was to create a like-for-like product which had all the good uses of plastic — lightweight, easy to handle and sturdy. The difference was to make it easily biodegradable and compostable," says Singhal. The company decided to use agricultural waste because it moulded easily into various shapes.

At that time the Commonwealth Games were being organised in Delhi and the government wanted the event to be green. Ecoware swung its first deal with the Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC) to supply eco-friendly tableware for the meals being served. Their first foray into the market enabled them to test their products and capture feedback.

"Our tableware got a significant amount of attention and acceptance. That gave us the confidence to go ahead and launch ourselves commercially," says Singhal.

Ecoware now manufactures 125 million pieces of tableware a year at its manufacturing factory in Greater Noida. The initial investment was ₹4 crore in 2009. They are expecting to close this fiscal year with ₹14 crore in revenue.

"Our products are only 10-15 percent more



Guilt free eating: Rhea Mazumdar Singhal with her company's eco-friendly tableware

expensive than plastic," says Singhal. "They aren't meant to be premium products especially since we make them out of a raw material that is common," he adds. For example, a packet of 20 bowls that can hold 180 ml each works out to just ₹36. Also, very little waste is generated. Twenty grams of bagasse is needed to make a 20-inch plate which weighs 20 gm.

Ecoware has succeeded in making products akin to plastic. Their tableware is light, water-proof and oil-proof. You can even place their spoons, forks, plates and containers in the microwave and turn up the heat to 140 degrees C. The products are marketed as single-use though you can reuse the tableware.

All the cutlery and containers can be composted in your backyard. "It should take around 90 days,"

**Ecoware has invented tableware which has all the good uses of plastic — lightweight and easy to handle and sturdy — but is easily biodegradable and compostable.**

she says. "That's important in India where we don't segregate our waste at source."

A section on their website lists all the tests their products have gone through to ensure transparency and reassure their customers.

Bagasse and straw aren't sourced directly from farmers or farmer cooperatives but through intermediaries like sugar mills and paper pulping units. The advantage is the bagasse is cleaned and sand, silica and harmful chemicals removed. Ecoware finally receives a fibrous pulp which they

use to manufacture their products.

Since Ecoware was an early bird in eco-friendly tableware and packaging, it had to invest in building an ecosystem from scratch.

"We had to go to wholesale markets like Sadar Bazaar and convince sellers who had been there for generations selling plastics, to sell our products," says Singhal. Initially, they had to provide high profit margins to sellers to push their products.

The company switched to direct selling by opening its own online shop. It now has four main revenue channels — 30 distributors across the country, Haldiram's, a relationship that they developed when they first started, retail and exports.

In fact, exports are picking up as more and more countries are beginning to push legislation banning the use of single-use plastic, says Singhal.

It was Indian Railways that gave them their first break in 2010. "We lost touch with them in the middle but we approached them three years ago," she says.

The railways serves up 11 million meals a day and was keen to convert to biodegradable packaging.

Ecoware designed a tray for the railways that can hold rice, dal and sabzi on one plate, and is also microwaveable. For train passengers food is cooked by the IRCTC in a central kitchen early morning before being moved to the stations and finally to the trains. By the time the food gets to passengers, it needs to be heated.

Ecoware was selected via a tender and for the past year their trays are being used in trains starting their journey from Delhi. These include the Rajdhani, Shatabdi and Duronto Express trains. "This is a small programme right now. Once it's proven to be successful it will be expanded to other zones," says Singhal.

Ecoware wants to help the railways gradually eliminate aluminium casseroles and replace them with biodegradable ones. "Preferably ours," laughs Singhal, who has been a recipient of the Nari Shakti Puraskar, the highest civilian honour for women, from the President of India. ■

# INSIGHTS

OPINION | ANALYSIS | RESEARCH | IDEAS

## New India and the West



DELHI  
DARBAR

SANJAYA BARU

THE United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has expressed serious concern about the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) voted this month by the Indian Parliament. Stating that CAA "enshrines a pathway to citizenship for immigrants that specifically excludes Muslims, setting a legal criterion for citizenship based on religion" the USCIRF viewed CAA as a "dangerous turn in the wrong direction" running counter to "India's rich history of secular pluralism".

Many in India will agree with that conclusion but will question not just the prerogative that USCIRF has arrogated to itself in commenting on an Indian law passed by a democratically elected Parliament, but will point fingers at the US's own record on religious freedoms. Moreover, the supporters of CAA would argue, the US has been happy to work with many non-secular countries that privilege one community over another and do business with countries that constitutionally bar freedom of religion. So why now target India with sanctions?

However, such arguments are not going to take India very far in convincing international opinion about the legitimacy of its action with respect to CAA. Apart from the fact that India has enshrined equality of all religions in its Constitution, it has been historically open to people persecuted for their religious belief ranging from the Zoroastrian community in Persia to the Jews of Europe. India gave shelter to the Dalai Lama and his followers from Tibet and has welcomed Tamil Hindus from Sri Lanka and Muslim minorities like the Ahmadiyas from Pakistan. Why now this tailored Bill?

Western public opinion will increasingly turn hostile towards the present dispensation in India even if the West will continue to do business with India. That is the approach the West has followed with China, criticising its record on human freedoms and rights even while investing heavily in China. India has the capacity to withstand any sanctions the US may impose, as recommended by the USCIRF, and can afford to ignore western media and civil society criticism. But the terms of

engagement between India and the West, especially the US, are bound to be altered by the spate of religion-related policy decisions that the government of India has taken.

When US President George W. Bush first met Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on the ramparts of the Kremlin in the summer of 2005, he introduced the Indian PM to his wife, Laura, saying, "Meet the Indian Prime Minister, he is a Sikh. The Indian President is a Muslim, the leader of his party is Christian but it is a Hindu majority country." Many in the West viewed that as India's uniqueness. On the other hand, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power and increased its electoral base by appealing to Hindu sentiment and so it views its

imagined that long years of European domination had created an India in the West's image. Sadly, neither the West nor India's own national leadership adequately recognised the fact that unlike the monotheistic religions of 'the Book' — Christianity, Judaism and Islam — Hinduism has evolved as a liberal religion of pluralism and therefore offered a fertile ground for the growth of a liberal democracy. The values of Indian democracy are as much rooted in western values of individual freedom and human rights as they are in Hindu values of pluralism, the multiplicity of gods and the acceptance of the many-sidedness of Truth.

Whether this change in India is good or bad for Indian nationhood, its unity and integrity is one dimension to the issue. The other is what would it mean for India's relations with the rest of the world. Addressing the United States Congress in July 2005, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh proudly claimed, to great applause, "Indian democracy has been fashioned around India's civilisational ethos which celebrates diversity. Our society today is the culmination of centuries of assimilation of diverse peoples and ethnic groups. All the major religions of the world are represented in India. We have a tremendous diversity of languages, customs and traditions. ... There is no other country of a billion people, with our tremendous cultural, linguistic and religious diversity, that has tried to modernise its society and transform its economy within the framework of a functioning democracy."

This claim was made with great pride. Given the growing assertion of White supremacy in the US and its own record of religious bigotry, this claim ought to place

India on a higher pedestal. Yet, interventions like CAA have the potential to harm this personality of the Indian republic. Both Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi have, on several occasions, proudly asserted that India's civilisational ethos is based on the idea of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* — the world is one family. On his assumption of office as the President of India, Ramnath Kovind claimed, "Our endeavours are not for ourselves alone. Down the ages, India has believed in the philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* — the World is My Family. It is appropriate that the land of Lord Buddha should lead the world in its search for peace, tranquility and ecological balance." Given this claim, any policy that discriminates on the basis of religion ought to be regarded as abhorrent to the Indian ethos. Squaring the *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* image of India with Hindutva will remain a challenge and a conundrum. ■

Sanjaya Baru is a writer and Distinguished Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies & Analysis in New Delhi



The West does not quite know how to deal with a Hinduised India

partisan actions as being legitimised by the democratic process. Religion will remain at the heart of political mobilisation as long as secular issues like the assurance of livelihood security, education and health for all and such issues do not become the mobilising platforms of democratic politics.

The West does not quite know how to deal with a Hinduised India, while it has learnt how to live with Islamic and Jewish nations. The 'New India' that is emerging is one in which the majority Hindu community is increasingly asserting its cultural and civilisational identity that is distinct from western culture and values. This has already happened in the Islamic world and the West has come to terms with it. It will take effort on the West's part to come to terms with India's changing identity.

There is, however, a larger issue that deserves attention. The West has viewed India, like Japan, as an Asian nation with 'western values'. It was



# In the midst of a transition



## TECH TALES

KIRAN KARNIK

FEW, if any, would contest this assertion — “technology has radically altered how we live.” Yet, it is worth analysing which aspects of our lives have changed and to what extent there have been truly radical shifts, and over what time-scale. Are recent changes as impactful as the move from the hunter-gatherer era to settled agriculture? Have recent technologies caused as seminal a shift as the one from cottage-scale production to mass manufacturing of goods?

The mechanisation of agriculture has resulted in a country like the US having just two percent of its population employed in farming, in contrast to a time when agriculture was the predominant occupation. In India, such a technological transition is yet to happen; as a result, even today, about 40 percent of the people are engaged in agriculture. If, in the next two or three decades, technology propels us to reduce farm employment to a tenth of what it is today, that would indeed be radical, and have huge implications.

That, though, is an issue of the future. What of today?

One area of immense impact is communication. The ability of a majority of the population to speak with almost anyone, anywhere, at any time, is certainly a radical change from the situation even at the turn of the century. Anyone over 50 will recall the time when it was impossibly difficult to quickly reach a relative, friend or business associate in another location. Barring metro-to-metro communication, anything else meant a time-scale of a couple of days at least (for a letter by post), to a few hours (by booking a “trunk call” over the fixed-line telephone network). Today’s ease of calling through a mobile, and the very extensive network, have effectively demolished distance. Many people stay in touch with their children in other locations — even outside the country — on a daily basis. Technology has also made possible video calls from mobiles, and low cost has made this increasingly commonplace.

There appears to be little research on whether all this has resulted in closer or better relationships. However, there is little doubt that it has helped to rebuild or reinvigorate past connections, as the ease of communications has facilitated a link-up with friends or relatives living far away. Further, social

media — like Facebook or LinkedIn — have assisted countless people in locating long-lost friends, even as apps like WhatsApp have provided a platform for the creation of groups (batch-mates, common-interest groups, relatives, etc.) for shared communication.

A different and older form of communication is the technology of delivering video programmes. Direct-to-home TV has been around for decades, and has made a significant impact through a variety of channels (hundreds, in India) and especially its ability to reach even the remotest parts of the country. Villagers who may never have been to the nearest big city are now exposed to images and programmes from around the world. There is little doubt that this has not only had a significant socio-cultural impact, but also an economic one. Aspirations have changed and soared; intra-family



SHREY GUPTA

**One area of immense impact is communications. The ability of a majority of the population to speak with almost anyone, anywhere, is a radical change.**

dynamics is seeing shifts; culture has altered; and demand for products has been impacted (through both programme content and advertising).

The new means of delivering video, through streaming over the internet, has made a massive amount of content accessible on smartphones. Amplifying availability and accessibility is affordability — made possible by the low cost of data — resulting in vastly increased viewing time. Hardly surprising, then, that India leads the world in per capita data usage on mobile phones. This has not only amplified the socio-cultural and economic impact mentioned earlier, but has broadened it through the viewing of a wider variety of content.

Technology has impacted another realm: that of manufacturing and global trade. New technologies

in manufacturing (robotics, automation, 3D printing) are opening up new possibilities, but also creating concerns about job loss and the future of work.

Big improvements in logistics — on the ground, seas and sky — combined with better communications has resulted in global supply chains for many products, with components and sub-systems being made in multiple countries. This has altered the pattern of global trade, creating new inter-dependencies. Apart from trade, technology-induced globalisation affects the workforce composition, investment and talent flows.

In services too, communication technologies have facilitated new business models. One example is India’s very successful IT industry, which provides a vast array of out-sourcing and software services to global clients. New technologies of data analytics, AI and machine learning are being deployed to understand and predict behaviour. Will they evolve to influencing and manipulating behaviour?

Developments in genetics and life sciences are reaching fruition and are certain to revolutionise healthcare. In combination with electronics, they may blur the distinction between man and machine. The resulting promise (or threat?) of near-immortality poses tough questions, many of which relate to ethics and philosophy.

The future is set to be disrupted by technology; but what of the present?

In the past few decades, technology has not created any radical structural change. The foundation of societies continues to be the family; the centuries-old process of urbanisation has not seen a reversal; globalisation through the unfettered flow of people and goods was in vogue from ancient times, and even global supply-chains are but an extension of the processing by one country of raw material imported from another.

Arguably, one substantial change has been the communications technology-driven development of common-interest groups, not limited by distance or geography. It is yet too early to reach conclusions, but might these transnational communities be the genesis of a new structure and the end of the nation-state? Even greater revolutionary changes may be ushered through genetics and electronics: immortal humans and bionic beings — almost akin to the start of life on Earth.

On the other hand, technology — through the weapons it creates or the climate change it induces — may mean not immortality, but the end of life on Earth. A thought to mull, and a call to action.... ■

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# The status of NOTA



## ELECTION TRACKER

JAGDEEP CHHOKAR

THE phrase ‘criminalisation of politics’ entered the Indian lexicon in 1993 when it was used by the Vohra Committee which had been set up “to take stock of all available information about the activities of crime syndicates/mafia organisations which had developed links with and were being protected by government functionaries and political personalities”.

This high-powered committee stated unambiguously that there was a “nexus between criminal gangs ... and politicians ... in various parts of the country...” and that there were “underworld politicians”.

Responding to a public interest litigation (PIL) by a civil society organisation, the Supreme Court ordered that every person contesting an election to the parliament or an assembly would have to disclose all criminal cases against him/her in a sworn affidavit, as a necessary part of the nomination form.

Data from these affidavits over the years resulted in what were then felt to be startling revelations. Out of 543 MPs of the Lok Sabha in 2004, as many as 128 (24 percent) had criminal cases pending against them. This number increased, and continues to increase, to 162 (30 percent) in 2009, 185 (34 percent) in 2014, and 233 (43 percent) in 2019.

In 2004, the People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) filed a PIL in the Supreme Court asking for a new button to be provided on the electronic voting machines (EVMs) called NOTA (None Of The Above). The primary purpose was to protect the confidentiality of a voter who wanted to cast his/her vote but did not want to vote for any of the candidates. The existing provision in 2004 was that such a voter would have to sign on a form saying s/he did not wish to vote for any of the candidates. Since these forms were preserved, the identity of the voter could be found out which created the possibility of some of the candidates harassing that voter because s/he did not vote for one of them. Secrecy or confidentiality of one’s vote so that one can vote without any fear of consequences is, in any case, an accepted principle of democracy all over the world.

The Supreme Court in a judgment delivered on September 23, 2013, directed the Election Commission to “provide necessary provision in the ballot papers/EVMs and another button called ‘None of the Above’ (NOTA) may be provided in

EVMs so that the voters, who come to the polling booth and decide not to vote for any of the candidates in the fray, are able to exercise their right not to vote while maintaining their right of secrecy”.

The court made very significant observations in the judgment, one of which said, “When the political parties realize that a large number of people are expressing their disapproval with the candidates being put up by them, gradually there will be a systemic change and the political parties will be forced to accept the will of the people and field candidates who are known for their integrity.”

This was important because it had become clear over the years that political parties continued to give tickets to persons with very dubious records, including those of serious crimes. Lest it be considered an exaggeration, the 2019 Lok Sabha election had nine candidates who had rape charges pending against them! It is sad that three of



An official explaining how an EVM with a NOTA button works

them did get elected.

When requested not to give tickets to such people, political parties claim (a) these people have very high “winnability”, (b) other parties also do the same, if we don’t our candidate will lose, and (c) people vote for such candidates.

The last reason is not correct. Regardless of the number of candidates, only about two or three have a reasonable chance of getting elected and these belong to leading political parties. If a voter does not deliberately want her/his vote to go waste, s/he will have no real choice whom to vote for. Data collected over several elections shows that almost half the constituencies have three or more candidates with criminal records.

This is why the Supreme Court’s observation that political parties will be “forced to accept the will of the people and field candidates who are known for their integrity” becomes important. It is worth noting that the Court did not use words such as “motivated” or “encouraged” but said “forced”!

The problem has been with implementation of the judgment. The Election Commission of India

decided, in its wisdom, to implement the letter of the judgment while overlooking its spirit. It provided a NOTA button on the EVMs but did not change the process of deciding the winner. The result is that even if the NOTA button gets more votes than any of the candidates, the candidate with the highest number of votes after NOTA is declared elected. This goes completely against the “will of the people” to which the Supreme Court gave primacy.

Another factor that has prevented NOTA from achieving its full potential is that political parties and their leaders have been actively campaigning against NOTA. They have been asking people not to opt for NOTA because these votes have no impact on who gets elected. This, when the votes polled by NOTA have continued to increase gradually. Several constituencies have seen NOTA getting more votes than the winning margin, the difference between the votes polled by the winner and the candidate

who came second. There have also been some, very few, cases where NOTA came at number 2, getting more votes than any of the candidates except the winner.

State Election Commissions (SECs) who are responsible for conducting elections to panchayats and local bodies and are constitutional bodies independent of the Election Commission, have shown remarkable initiative in this regard. The SEC of Maharashtra issued a notification on June 13, 2018, saying: “If it is noticed while counting, that NOTA has received the highest number of valid votes, then the said election for that particular seat shall be countermanded and fresh elections shall be held for such a post.” While this was a very progressive step, it stopped short of giving NOTA the teeth that the Supreme Court intended. It would be possible for the same candidate

to contest the fresh election and the situation could repeat itself indefinitely, frustrating the “spirit” of the Supreme Court’s judgment.

Another SEC stepped in and took the matter further. Just a few months after the Maharashtra notification, the SEC in Haryana issued a similar notification on November 22, 2018. This one said that if “all the contesting candidates individually receive lesser votes than ... NOTA ...,” then not only “none of the contesting candidates will be declared as elected” but “all such contesting candidates who secured less votes than NOTA shall not be eligible to re-file the nomination/contest the re-election”.

This is what makes NOTA what the Supreme Court wanted it to be. One hopes the ECI will follow the example set by the two SECs, honour the spirit of the Supreme Court’s judgment and the “will of the people”, “forcing” political parties “to field candidates who are known for their integrity”. ■

Jagdeep S. Chhokar is former Professor, Dean, and Director in-charge of Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad and a founding member of the Association for Democratic Reforms. Views are personal.



# The value of team spirit



## VILLAGE VOICES

R. BALASUBRAMANIAM

More than two decades ago, we petitioned the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) on behalf of the indigenous tribals living on the fringes of the Bandipur National Park, on their improper rehabilitation. The tribals had suffered the problems of inappropriate and inadequate Resettlement and Rehabilitation (R&R) post the construction of the Kabini reservoir and the declaration of their forests as a National Park. Though these events happened in the 1960s and '70s, no R&R of any sort had been undertaken and the tribals had been left to fend for themselves.

Outraged at this injustice, we had approached the NHRC after exhausting all other means of securing justice for them. As part of the investigations, the NHRC had appointed Sri Chamanlal, a distinguished former Indian Police officer, as the Special Rapporteur to inquire into our claims. He made repeated visits to the site and met several senior officers along with the tribal leaders. He tried to understand the sequence of events and what had happened over several decades.

During one of his hearings I got upset at the Forest Department of Karnataka's defence. It claimed that the fact of tribals living in the forest when the government announced its intention of declaring a National Park at Bandipur was untrue and more a figment of my imagination. Unable to tolerate what I thought was an outrageous lie, I exploded at the officials present and gave them a piece of my mind in the harshest possible way. Things soon got heated and it looked like a free-for-all match with everyone ending up as losers, especially the tribals.

Thankfully, Chamanlalji put an end to this clash. He called a recess for all of us to cool down. During the break, he called me aside and gave me what I consider the most practical advice I have ever received. He patiently explained the role of the government and its officials as a critical component of a working democracy. He made me understand the relative permanence of the government and how nothing significant could be achieved by confronting the officials who represented the government. On the other hand, he insisted that only a fair and polite representation would get these officials to see what I was trying to explain.

He also informed me that a 'holier than thou' attitude, which most of us in civil society have, would not help the tribal cause. His advice, that I had no monopoly on ensuring justice for the marginalised, made me realise that the government and other democratic institutions too shared similar interests. His parting statement that day was, "One

can bend the government, but remember that breaking it leaves one with no mechanism to ensure redressal of people's grievances."

Being passionate about a cause also leaves you blinded to other issues. This blind passion is indeed a strong instrument for initiating social change. But it can insulate you from understanding other perspectives. It also makes one believe that other stakeholders have their own personal agendas and that only we in civil society organisations understand people's issues and are best suited to represent them.

Many decades ago, a few NGOs got together to sue a corporate entity that had built a resort inside a National Park. As an active participant in this struggle, I got convinced that all corporates are ruthless profiteers who have no intention of fulfilling the development aspirations of local people.

For years after that, I looked down on most corporates and their leaders as thievish manipulators whose single-minded intent was to enrich their bottom lines. It took me several enriching and

**Blind passion is a strong instrument for initiating social change. But it can insulate you from understanding other perspectives.**

constructive experiences to see how narrow and limited my initial view was. While there are several corporates that capture policy for their own private gains and make one feel disgusted, there are an equally large number who are serious and sincere about their intention to contribute to society and the nation.

Development cannot be any single player's prerogative. While the Indian Constitution makes the State the predominant player, we must appreciate that there are several other key stakeholders who need to come together to make a real difference in people's lives. The State has the primary mandate of initiating the well-being of its citizens. But this cannot and should not make citizens abdicate their role in their own development. An enlightened and engaged citizenry is as critical to the development of a nation as a responsive and transparent government. The State also creates regulatory processes that can inhibit or facilitate the growth of a vibrant private sector.

A socially conscious private sector with a clear focus on the triple bottom line of people, planet and profits, is crucial for promoting equitable development. With CSR becoming a part of the corporate storyline, the private sector will need support in understanding that development is not

necessarily limited to compassionate philanthropy. Civil society groups need a supporting ecosystem. They are capable of reaching unreached areas and delivering innovative as well as cost-effective solutions to several developmental problems. They need the support of the government and corporates to continue undertaking community-centric development initiatives.

NGOs need physical, fiscal and the social space to operate — an ecosystem that only an understanding and secure State can provide. At the same time, NGOs too need to be respectful and sensitive to the different pressures that the State and corporates are subject to. They need to move away from holding on to close-minded, anti-establishment stances with the view that all efforts by governments are suspicious and condemnable. NGOs also need to be cautious about not ending up as mere government contractors moving from one project to the next.

Media too has started to play a role. One cannot discount the impact that it can have on the development narrative. While the challenge of dominant and powerful forces controlling the media is a reality, authentic development journalism too plays a role in shaping the views and opinions of other stakeholders in the development process. Academia needs to move away from their insulated positions and begin engaging with development practitioners and provide evidence-driven solutions that are grounded in sound theory and are applicable in the real world.

Human development is a complex and long-drawn process that requires resources and a variety of talent to ensure that it is equitable, fair, just and sustainable. We need to learn to work with others and begin by trusting them, their intent and their abilities. Today's problems in areas such as social justice, education, international relations, healthcare, global warming, human rights, economic growth, businesses and gender issues are complex and require different skills to tackle them.

No single institution, be it the government, a corporation or a non-profit, can solve these problems in isolation. More than ever, one must integrate knowledge and talent from individuals, units, and organisations in the business, non-profit and government sectors to advance the common good of the communities that all of them serve. We need to build on the strengths of one another rather than focusing on and criticising everybody's shortcomings.

Attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) targets by 2030 is possible only through a synergistic partnership of all major players of development. We need to work together without subsuming every sector's unique individuality. No one sector can truly supplant the other. We must aspire to supplement each sector to bring about meaningful social change. This attitude takes courage, demands humility and is risky but rewarding. And this can happen only when all of us keep the interests of the communities paramount. ■

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# LIVING

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## Shadipur curates a theatre fest

### Studio Safdar helps local choices prevail

SIDIKA SEHGAL

SHADIPUR is an unlikely locality for a theatre festival. A lower middle class colony in West Delhi, it is inhabited by working class people. There are Hindu and Muslim blocks within Shadipur and the neighbouring colony is dominated by Sikhs. Houses are small, tightly packed and criss-crossed by narrow lanes. Nearby Ranjeet Nagar is where many daily wage labourers live.

This isn't a place that a high-brow theatre-going crowd would visit. But then the Shadipur Natak Utsav was not for them. It was for the locals of Shadipur and the plays were specially handpicked by five residents of Shadipur.

The idea of organising a community-curated theatre festival came from Studio Safdar, an independent space for art and activism. "Some of our inspiration came from knowing the people here. They are interesting in so many ways," said Sudhanva Deshpande, founder-trustee of Studio Safdar.

The curators of the festival were Ravi Kumar Otwal, a tea shop owner, Poonam Rajput, a teacher at DAV school in Vikaspuri, Iqbal Hussain, owner of an automobile workshop, Naseem Akhtar, who runs a leather boots business in Sahibabad, and Kamlesh Kumari, who worked for MTNL for 39 years before retiring in 2017.

Over piping hot cups of tea, Otwal recounted his work in a commercial photography studio before he set up his tea stall 25 years ago. He was never much of a theatre-goer till Studio Safdar set up shop in Shadipur in 2012, he admits.

Rajput confessed that the only plays she had seen were the ones held in Studio Safdar. But the influence theatre wields is not lost on her. "What people are unable to communicate through words can reach people very effectively through the medium of theatre," she says. Otwal echoes her opinion. "You get to learn new things through plays. Something about the country, something about the home," he says. All the curators said they saw theatre as a medium to spread awareness about issues of relevance.

Kumari now grows organic vegetables on the terrace of her Shadipur residence and takes great pride in it. She recalls that when she was working and looking after her children, there was no time to think of much else, least of all theatre. But her daughter is now pursuing a PhD in theatre from Jawaharlal Nehru University. Kumari talks of the excitement of watching a live performance. "It's not like a film," she says. "Here you can go and talk to the artistes afterwards."



*Maccoman was a part-Bengali, part-Hindi performance of Macbeth*



*Children eagerly wait for a performance to begin*

**'You get to learn new things through plays. Something about the country, something about the home,' says Otwal, tea-seller who was a curator.**

and they were initially reluctant to participate. But with a bit of nudging, the five curators emerged. The diversity among curators was a conscious decision — there are two women, two Muslims and one Dalit in this panel of five.

In September, well-known theatre personality Sanjana Kapoor, who is also a trustee of the Studio Safdar Trust, conducted a workshop with the curators. Kapoor's role was to help them understand who their audience would be and which plays they would want their community to see. There was a play about same sex love which didn't get selected, but the curators were keen that young people in Shadipur watch the play.

"Do we think about what the play would look like

This was unknown territory for most residents

*Continued on page 30*





Sudharva Deshpande, founder-trustee of the Studio Safdar Trust



Ravi Kumar Otwal, teashop owner and curator



Moloyashree Hashmi, founder of the Studio Safdar Trust



Kamlesh Kumari, retired MTNL employee and curator



Poonam Rajput, teacher and curator

onstage, or do we look at the acting? Is the theme more important? The way she put it, these were points to mull over before taking a decision," recalled Moloyashree Hashmi, founder-trustee of Studio Safdar. The intent of the workshop was to help the five curators articulate what they liked or disliked about a play. Kapoor was simply

**Romeo Ravidas & Juliet Devi was an intense play loosely based on the murder of Pradip Rathod who was killed for owning and riding a horse.**

moderating their discussions.

Over three days, the curatorial team watched video clips of some 50 entries and selected seven plays. "The curators were aware of the fact that they must bring diversity to what they were curating," said Deshpande.

The seven plays which they finally chose all had different themes — *Kabutar Ja Ja Ja* was a solo play about an urban housewife, while *Romeo Ravidas & Juliet Devi* was about casteism. *Shakuntalam – Agar Pura Kar Paye Toh* was a comedy in which three clowns tried to perform *Shakuntalam*. It was the most well-received play.

Each play had its own flavour. *Maccoman, The Power Play*, was an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* by Madhyamgram Natomon Natya Sanstha, Kolkata. *Macbeth* became *Maccoman* in this part-Hindi, part-Bengali performance. The play concluded with the thought that our obsession

with stories of kings is actually symptomatic of our desire for power.

*Romeo Ravidas & Juliet Devi* was an intense play and confronted the audience with uncomfortable contemporary realities. It was loosely based on the murder of Pradip Rathod in Gujarat and the life of Kausalya Shankar, an Indian activist. In March 2018, Rathod, a Dalit, was killed by upper caste men in his village for owning and riding a horse. In March 2016, Shankar's husband, who was a Dalit, was murdered in an honour killing.

It was a two-actor play in which the duo sang and played instruments. Sharmistha Saha, director and co-writer, said that the play was inspired by the two real-life incidents. A lot of caste and gender issues were brought up during rehearsal. "But it didn't seem difficult because the discussions were very rich," she says.

One of the highlights for the performers and for the team at Studio Safdar was that children came in large numbers for the festival. They arrived at the venue before time, bought their tickets and patiently sat through serious plays like *Romeo Ravidas & Juliet Devi*.

No child was barred from watching a play but they were encouraged to bring some money. "We want children to grow up with the idea that performance is something you should pay for," says Deshpande. The amount didn't really matter — some brought a rupee or two, but there were a few who gave 10, even 20 rupees.

A four-level pricing structure was worked out for the festival. For Shadipur residents, the ticket was a mere ₹20. For people from across Delhi, the cost of the ticket was ₹200. Children could pay whatever they wished while entry for daily wagers was free. "We just knew that if a rickshawallah comes, we're not going to ask him for ₹20," said Deshpande.

This differential pricing is a significant indicator of what Studio Safdar stands for. "Just before Safdar (Hashmi) died, he had begun to plan a cultural centre in a working class area," said Deshpande.

What does it really mean to be a cultural space in a working class area? Studio Safdar and their Mayday Bookstore are designed as spaces where anyone from the local community can walk in and feel at home. Every Sunday, children from Shadipur come to read books and every Wednesday, a film is screened for them.

Deshpande explains that Delhi is culturally skewed in favour of the elite and the rich. All the best restaurants, art galleries, performance spaces, and bookshops are in South Delhi or Central Delhi. In West Delhi, there are a few bookshops and a sparse sprinkling of performance spaces. They wanted Studio Safdar to be in East Delhi or West Delhi. Shadipur is where it all worked out in the end.

The community-curated theatre festival, which was held from November 15 to 22, added a certain effervescence to Shadipur. It was the first iteration of the event and Deshpande doesn't know what shape it will take, going forward. But it has been a huge success.

Kumari said that many people came up to her to say the selection of plays had been very good. The five curators are happy their choices were appreciated by the community. As Hashmi said, "They realised that they can also curate. It's not something that can't be learnt." ■

# Galle's great for its colonial past

SUSHEELA NAIR

IT was noon when we sauntered into the cobbled streets of Galle, a UNESCO World Heritage Site on the southwest coast of Sri Lanka. As we ambled leisurely around its meandering streets, we tarried awhile to admire the restored architecture of colonial buildings, ancient mosques and quaint churches, grand mansions and museums. Strolling down the streets we got a full perspective of the place — of the town inside the walls and the Indian Ocean on the other side. We gazed in admiration at the grand warehouses and palatial residences built during Dutch rule.

The place resonates with history and abounds in landmarks, including the town's natural harbour, the lighthouse, the National Maritime Museum, St Mary's Cathedral, founded by Jesuit priests, a Shiva temple, Amangalla, the historical luxury hotel, and the Meeran Jamma Masjid, a Dutch-era mosque with subtle Dutch architectural touches. The landscape transported us to the glorious past, to a time when Galle was a busy outpost for the spice trade, enticing voyagers, explorers, seafarers and traders for centuries from the remote corners of the world. It was featured in Ptolemy's world map and also visited by Ibn Batuta.

Claimed to be the largest fort in Asia built by European colonisers, Galle's tryst with colonial powers began with the Portuguese who constructed the iconic Galle Fort in 1588. It was first built of mud and palisades by the Portuguese. By 1640, the Dutch had fortified it. The Dutch evicted the Portuguese in the 17th century and made Galle their own. They fortified the town in their distinctive architectural style and large parts of it are still frozen in time. By the late 17th century, as the Union Jack unfurled across Asia, the fort passed into British hands and remained their headquarters until Sri Lanka achieved independence in 1948.

The walled city is surrounded by thick ramparts. You can walk alongside — start at one end and finish at the other. You can hang out at the beach, see the old prison between the ramparts and the waves, check out the lighthouse and clock tower, watch schoolchildren play cricket and the local lads take a plunge into the ocean from the ancient citadel.

We entered Galle Fort through the main gate overlooking the cricket stadium around 250 metres from the railway and bus stations. We started with the Dutch Reformed Church which is one of the oldest places of worship for Protestants in Sri Lanka. Originally built with stone from the Dutch cemeteries, its other impressive features include a pipe organ with manual bellows and an imposing pulpit made from calamander wood, topped by a grand hexagonal canopy.

The building dates from 1752. Its floor is lined with gravestones of Dutch citizens while the finely carved pulpit and pipe organ with manual bellows sit alongside various wall tablets recording the lives of later British settlers. It is said that there are underground tunnels running from the church to the Governor's House. Equally impressive is the



Strolling down the ramparts of the Galle fort

SUSHEELA NAIR



The Maritime Archaeological Museum

All Saints Anglican Church, an imposing Victorian Gothic structure with striking exteriors, multiple arches and a turret. It boasts impressive stained glass windows, beautifully carved timber arches and pews of Burma teak.

From there we headed to the Maritime Archaeological Museum housed in the old, sprawling Dutch warehouse, one of Galle's biggest and most eye-catching colonial buildings in the fort. Perhaps this is the only museum which showcases the marine biological and anthropological aspects of the southern coast of Sri Lanka. It basically exhibits the marine artefacts found during underwater expeditions. We saw a collection of boat models, maps and other things retrieved from centuries of shipwrecks. The traditional lifestyle of fishing communities and their various techniques are also on display. An introductory video presentation sets the scene and there are interactive displays that illuminate the city's maritime past, including the many shipwrecks in Galle's surrounding waters.

A part of this museum is dedicated to the display of the marine ecosystem and its varied flora and fauna, including some amazing finds. We spotted models of mangroves, seashore plants, turtles,

seabirds and a wide range of marine mammals. Some specimens of corals and marine shells can also be found here. It is the perfect place to learn about Sri Lankan fishing boats, the visiting merchants and the colonial powers. The warehouse building in itself deserves a visit! The numerous wrecks on the coast of Sri Lanka have provided some great finds. A large skeleton of a whale mounted on the roof is an altogether mesmerising experience.

Built in Dutch colonial style, Fort National Museum is a one-storied building located next to Amangalla Hotel. Housed in the oldest Dutch building inside Galle Fort, the museum has three galleries that provide an insight into the origin, cultural beliefs, social and physical developments of native Sri Lankans over centuries. The first gallery has an interesting collection of turtle shell jewelry, Beeralu lace weaving and the most popular exhibit, traditional wooden mask carving. The second gallery houses ancient Dutch furniture, East India Co. VOC weapons and porcelain. The third gallery, called Sri Lanka-China Friendship Gallery, has archaeological artefacts from Sri Lanka and China trade alliances. Don't miss seeing the clock. It dates back to the 1700s and is made from coconut shell. We ended our heritage walk with scouting for souvenirs to take home and found plenty of knick-knacks and antiques in every shop. ■

## FACT FILE

**Sri Lankan Airlines operates regular flights from major Indian cities to Colombo. Galle is a two-hour drive from the bustling city of Colombo.**

**What to buy:** Gems, stones, masks, and other knick-knacks.

**Tips:** Have lunch at Fortaleza Restaurant, converted from a warehouse for spices, and afternoon tea with scones at Amangalla Hotel.

**For Galle Heritage Walks contact shanjei@gmail.com Mobile: (+94) 772- 283-001**





Picture of a ritual art form in Karnataka's coastal area by Dr Akter Husain



Shreenivas Yenni's photo of devotees dancing at the Palkhi festival in Pandharpur



'Milk Shower' at Mahamastakabhisheka, Shraavanabelagola, by Shreenivas Yenni



Uday Tejaswi Urs' picture of Jallikattu in Madurai



Leap of Faith, a Theyyam performance in Kannur by Dheeraj Rajpal

# FESTIVALS, FAIRS AND RITUALS

CIVIL SOCIETY REVIEW

INDIA's fascinating world of fairs, festivals and rituals came alive at an exhibition organised by Essen Communications at Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath in Bengaluru over December 19-22.

More than 100 photographs shot by 23 photographers depicted 'Fairs, Festivals and Rituals of India' from the states of Karnataka, Kerala, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh, as well as Ladakh.

The idea wasn't to hold a photography competition but to show people a slice of India's great cultural heritage. The display of pictures was a riot of colours and amazing sights. There were glimpses of the Pushkar Fair, the ritualistic movements of *kolla* and *bhootharadhane* and images of Theyyam performances exuding spiritual energy.

The exhibition included pictures of the riotous turmeric festival at Bhandara, devotees dancing at the Palkhi festival in Pandarpur, the saree and bike swag at the Shobha Yatra of Gudipadwa in Maharashtra, Bonalu celebrations in Telangana, the gentle cascade of flowers and milk during the Mahamastakabhisheka at Jain pilgrimage centres in Karnataka, buffaloes racing down a slushy track in Karnataka, the vibrant hues of Holi at Mathura and the colourful water regatta in Aranmula.

Other eye-catching photos included those of Naga *sadhus* at the Kumbh Mela at Haridwar and

Varanasi, Dussehra celebrations in Mysore and the Thrissur Pooram, a spectacular festival of caparisoned elephants.

The three best entries were:

- Dheeraj Rajpal M. for his picture, 'Leap of Faith', of a Theyyam performance in Kannur.
- Shreenivas Yenni for 'Devotees dance at the Palkhi festival in Pandharpur' in Maharashtra.
- Uday Tejaswi Urs for 'Downunder' at Jallikattu in Madurai.

Certificates of merit were awarded to:

- Anita Mysore for 'Invoking Blessings' at Mahamastakabhisheka, Shraavanabelagola.
- Shreenivas Yenni for 'Milk Shower' at Mahamastakabhisheka, Shraavanabelagola.
- Padmanabha KG for 'A parade of Kerala's art forms' in Alleppey.
- Dheeraj Rajpal for 'Dancing to the beats of chants and drums', a Theyyam performance in Kannur.
- Dr Akter Husain for 'The Stance', of a ritual art form in Mangalore.

The exhibition was organised by Susheela Nair, travel writer, photographer and director of Essen Communications. ■

# Insider's account of India's nuclear setup

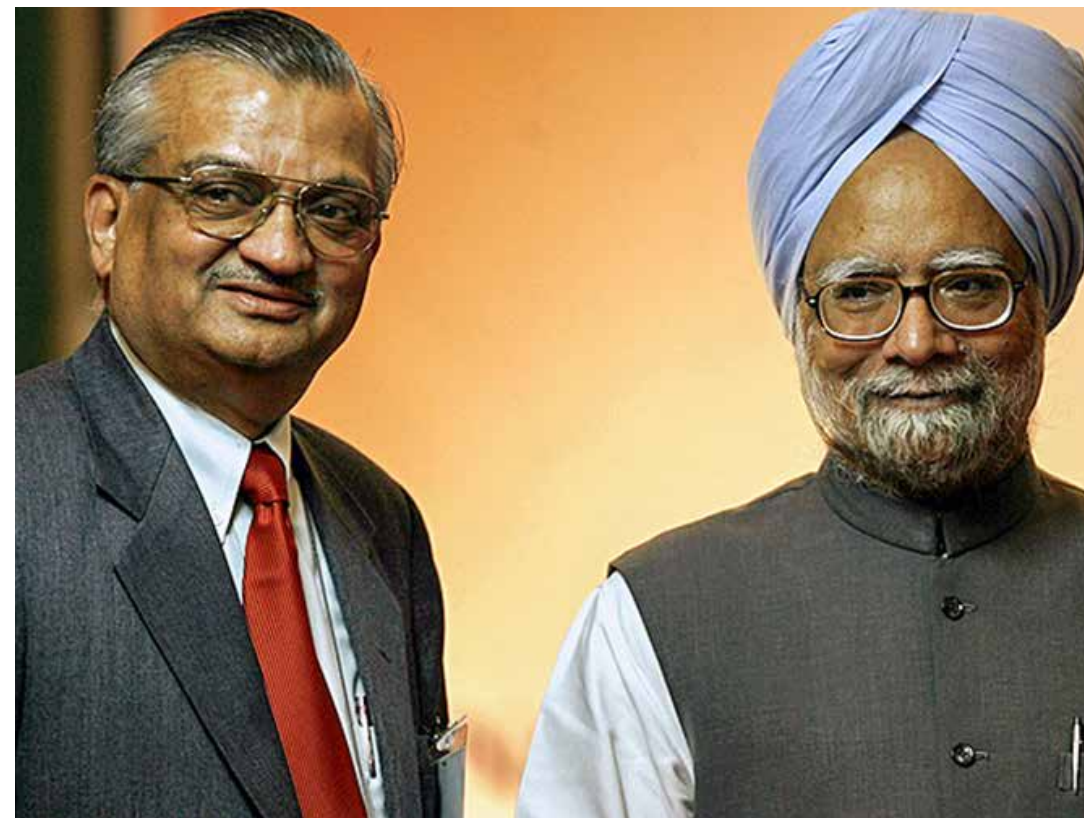
SANJAYA BARU

A decade ago this book would have hit the headlines. It is a testimony to media's short memory that Anil Kakodkar's brief but interesting autobiography has not yet made waves. Indeed, many young readers of today may not even understand why the book ought to be news. In the politically contentious months of 2006-08 when the fate of the negotiations towards an India-United States civil nuclear energy cooperation agreement hung in the balance, every word that Kakodkar uttered on the arcane specifics of the deal made a difference to the stability of the Manmohan Singh government. *Fire and Fury* is, therefore, an apt title for Kakodkar's autobiography. But, let us not get ahead of the narrative.

Anil Kakodkar is without doubt one of India's most distinguished and talented scientist-engineers. I say 'scientist-engineer' advisedly since Kakodkar himself argues that in the field of nuclear science and technology "treating scientists and engineers differently is counterproductive". This "silo mentality", he observes, has "deep roots in our society" — alluding to the caste system. Kakodkar, like many of his colleagues at the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC), was a scientist-engineer who mastered the physics, chemistry and the engineering of India's largely home-made nuclear energy and weapons capability. He had a key role in the nuclear tests of 1974 and 1998.

Kakodkar was born into a Maharashtrian family of modest means and grew up in an atmosphere of patriotism and service to society. His father worked at Mahatma Gandhi's Sevagram after graduating from Kashi Vishwavidyalaya and was imprisoned for nine years in Goa by the Portuguese rulers he was fighting to oust. Consequently, Kakodkar's mother became the central figure in his life in his early years. She ran a school, made ends meet and deeply influenced her bright son. Kakodkar has dedicated his book to her.

After a brilliant run at school and college, Kakodkar took up a job in a private company to help his family's finances. After securing a job at Premier Automobiles he opted out, disgusted at the feudal obeisance demanded by the owner, Seth Lalchand Hirachand, from his employees. By happenstance he landed up at a training school at what was then called the Atomic Energy



Anil Kakodkar with Manmohan Singh

**Kakodkar believes he alone stood between a bad deal and one that served India well. He quotes Singh giving him that credit, saying, 'You have saved the country.'**

Establishment. Chapters 2 to 5 recount in great detail Kakodkar's experience rising up the ranks at BARC and his deepening engagement with India's nuclear programme.

His observations on Indian work culture are valuable. After a one-year course in Britain, where he declined a job offer and returned home to BARC, Kakodkar observed that while the organisational culture within the British institution was based on trust, in India the British had left an administrative system based on distrust. Indian bureaucracy only perpetuated that culture.

Kakodkar is candid about the scientific work culture within which he grew up. Tales of squabbles within research teams and worries about "sharks" in the organisation suggest that BARC was full of highly competitive and, perhaps, egotistic individuals. When his boss, V.S. Meckoni, who gets full marks for mentoring him, pushes him up the ladder for promotion, Kakodkar's hesitation tells a tale. "I am a small fry," he says, "and if I get in, these big fellows will chew me out." Was that a necessary downside of bringing the best and brightest together to undertake a project under difficult circumstances and with limited funds?

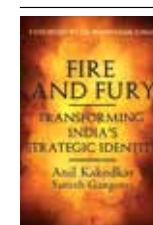
The story of India's nuclear programme is a story of perseverance in an environment of modest financial means and external sanctions and Kakodkar tells it well. India was fortunate to have had such leaders as Homi Bhabha, H.M. Sethna, Raja Ramanna, P.K. Iyengar, M.R. Srinivasan, R.

Chidambaram and a host of others who worked with dedication and secured India's strategic autonomy. Kakodkar repeatedly celebrates the "team spirit" that enabled him and his colleagues to make India a nuclear weapons state. He has valuable advice on how India can improve its educational and research capabilities.

The chapter on the nuclear deal is what will generate controversy. One consequence of the nuclear establishment working under debilitating sanctions imposed by western nations led by the United States was the deep suspicion it developed towards the West in general and the US in particular. So it was not surprising that Kakodkar remained deeply sceptical of US motivations and intentions in entering into the nuclear deal with India. The framework agreement of July 18, 2005, was inked by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President George W. Bush after many internal differences were ironed out by both leaders within their respective teams.

Kakodkar believes he alone stood between a bad deal and one that served India well. He quotes Singh giving him that credit, saying, "You have saved the country." (p.101)

The differences within the government spilled out into the media. Objecting to draft formulations coming out of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and the Prime Minister's Office, Kakodkar says, "I had to put my foot down and that was the reason I went public with my stand. While doing so I kept my resignation letter in my pocket." (p.107)



Fire and Fury: Transforming India's Strategic Identity Anil Kakodkar & Suresh Gangotra Rupa Publications ₹500

"I began to look like a villain," he complains. (p.99) "I was being singled out as the fall guy." (p.100) He quotes Ron Somers, who headed the US-India Business Council and lobbied hard for the deal, telling him that he had been told that "Anil Kakodkar was the only hurdle" in the completion of the deal. (p.105)

Kakodkar has not shied away from naming individuals in government who were supportive of his stance during the negotiations. By not naming the others who were equally involved we must conjecture that he is either censuring their role or believes they played no role at all! He does not hesitate to call the external affairs ministry a "divided" house, adding, "I had sympathisers and supporters in MEA who would urge me to be careful and firm... Through them I would also receive the next day's news in advance." (p.108)

Kakodkar has words of praise for Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon but none for his predecessor, Shyam Saran. On the drafting of the contentious civil nuclear liability agreement, handled by Menon and Prithviraj Chavan, then minister of state in the PMO, Kakodkar says, "The way it happened was rather impractical, very disruptive and without sufficient stakeholder engagement." (p.112) It was left to S. Jaishankar, as foreign secretary, to finally tie up the loose ends of the civil liability law.

In response to opposition criticism that the deal was being 'rushed through', the PMO clarified repeatedly that the time-table was partly set by the US political calendar, with Bush's term coming to an end, and by the fact that India's nuclear plants were running out of fuel. Kakodkar admits that the

**Kakodkar has not shied away from naming individuals in government who were supportive of his stance during the negotiations.**

latter was indeed true. The Union government's inability to secure adequate uranium, with domestic supply constrained by environmentalists holding up mining and imports restricted by even Russia and France saying they could supply only if India secured an exemption from the Nuclear Suppliers' Group, made an early conclusion of the US-India deal imperative.

Kakodkar and his associate, Suresh Gangotra, have written an interesting book that should be widely read. The book will stir controversy with its observations on internal differences within government. Interestingly, Kakodkar's claim that he alone protected India's strategic autonomy by securing a good deal finds resonance in Manmohan Singh's foreword where he credits Kakodkar for being "the key contributor to India's emergence as a full-grown nuclear power". If there ever was a 'key' contributor, it was George W. Bush Jr. That's another story. ■





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Dr SRIKANTH

**For sound sleep**

**H**OW many of you are blessed with sound, undisturbed sleep every night? If your answer is in the affirmative, you are one of the fortunate ones!

Complaints of inadequate sleep, difficulty in falling asleep or not maintaining sleep long enough to wake up feeling fresh are becoming increasingly common these days. It isn't how long one sleeps that counts — it is the quality of sleep which is more important: how deep one has slept and how energetic and enthusiastic one feels after waking up. This is the key aspect in determining quality of sleep.

If you suffer from sleeplessness for a day or two, you need not worry. However, if you don't sleep most nights for more than a month, it may lead to severe fatigue, anxiety, depression and lack of concentration. Hence, sleep deprivation should be addressed at the earliest. Insomnia, as this condition is called, increases steadily with age and is reported by almost one in three individuals aged 65 years and above.

**CAUSES**

Insomnia is occasionally a symptom of an underlying medical or psychological condition but it may also be caused by stress or lifestyle changes. About 50 percent of insomnia cases have no identifiable cause.

Some of the identified causes of insomnia include:

- Uncomfortable and unfamiliar sleeping environment.
- Disruption of circadian rhythms — such as working night shifts, change in work schedule, jetlag, late-night parties, etc.
- Substance abuse — smoking, excessive consumption of

caffeine/alcohol/recreational drugs.

- Blue screen before retiring to bed: excessive exposure to mobile/computer screen or watching television before sleeping.
- Certain illnesses/medications.

**SYMPTOMS**

- Difficulty in falling asleep, despite being tired.
- Not feeling refreshed after waking up in the morning.
- Impaired ability to perform normal activities: daytime drowsiness, irritability, difficulty in concentration.
- Lethargy, generalised body ache and feeling of heaviness.

**MANAGEMENT**

Insomnia lasting from a single night to a week, usually caused by events which alter normal sleep patterns such as travel or sleeping in an unfamiliar environment, may not need any immediate medical intervention.

If insomnia carries on for about two to three weeks and is due to emotional factors such as worry or stress, it may be set right with slight lifestyle modifications and mind control.

Regular practice of meditation will help in calming one's mind. Meditate once in the morning and before going to bed to curb stress and aid in undisturbed sleep.

Keep physically active. A daily routine of a brisk walk for 45 minutes/aerobics/surya namaskar, a set of yogasanas or any sort of physical exercises will certainly be helpful. Consuming sugarcane juice/meat soup/khus-khus kheer/warm buffalo milk before bedtime may help in inducing sleep. You can add one or two strands of pure saffron to the kheer/milk to achieve better results.

You can coax your partner to massage your scalp and feet just before you sleep. Gently massaging the scalp and soles with few drops of coconut oil/gingelly oil especially before bedtime helps the body and mind relax.

Avoid excessive consumption of coffee, tea, soft drinks, alcohol, and smoking. These are all causes

of insomnia. Eat a light, early and easily digestible dinner. Avoid incompatible, heavy to digest, spicy foods at night.

Don't look at blue screens (mobile/computer/TV) at least one hour before going to bed. Ensure that none of these enter your bedroom.

If sleeplessness is due to existing/underlying medical problems, the same must be addressed on priority.

**GENERAL TIPS**

A fixed sleep time routine is helpful. The bed should be neat and clean and the bedroom calm and quiet. A noiseless room without excessive light is an important criterion. You can use an eye shade and ear plugs. Choose a bed and pillow which you find comfortable. Your bedsheets should be soft, smooth and light coloured.

Avoid anything that tends to disturb your mind before sleep time. Avoid stimulating discussions or arguments. Strictly avoid horror/tragedy/stimulating books or videos. A brief workout followed by a warm shower before retiring will certainly help you snooze happily.

**TREATMENT**

• Strictly avoid all causes of insomnia before opting for medical treatment. Many times mere avoidance of the aetiological factors and following these tips is sufficient for tackling insomnia.

- Single herbs like Ashvagandha, Brahmi, Tagara (Himalaya) are useful.
- Regular full body oil massage with Ksheerabala taila (any reputed pharmacy) or stress-relief massage oil (Himalaya) is helpful.
- If all the preventive measures and suggested medicaments haven't provided you relief within a fortnight, you should consult an Ayurveda physician who could recommend a suitable procedure like shirodhara/shiro basti/netra tarpana/karna poorana to free you from the clutches of insomnia. ■

*Dr Srikanth is a postgraduate in Ayurveda and has been a consulting physician for the past 19 years. He is currently National Manager, Scientific Services, at The Himalaya Drug Company*

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KILMORA's sweaters and mufflers evoke memories of woollens knitted by grandmothers and aunts. The woollens are made by rural women in Uttarakhand. In an age when machine-made clothes dominate the market, the homely feel of Kilmora's handwoven products is comforting. Kilmora's stall at Dastkar's Nature Bazaar was full of vibrant woollens including mufflers, socks, caps and gloves. There were also beautiful handwoven shawls and scarves as well as Nehru jackets for men and women. Kilmora is a brand promoted by Kumaon Grameen Udyog (KGU), a non-profit company established by the Central Himalayan Rural Action Group.

KGU works in Uttarakhand to give a fair deal to rural producers and consumers. The non-profit provides a steady source of income to women for their products, enabling them to have greater control over their lives and better status within the community. ■

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